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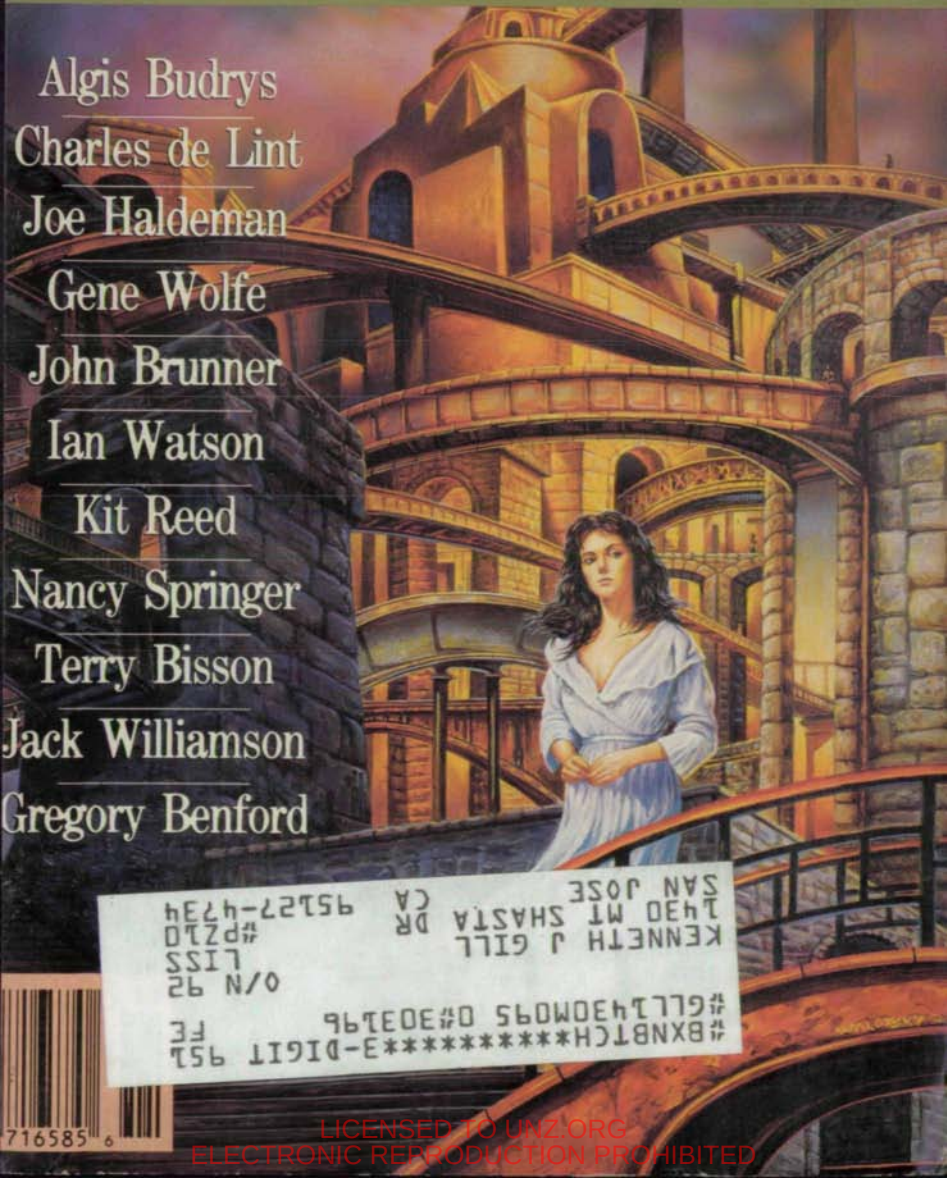

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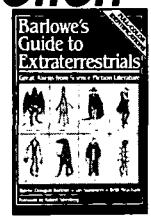

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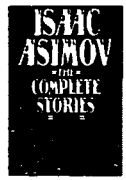

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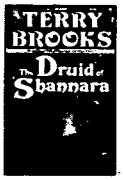

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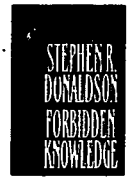

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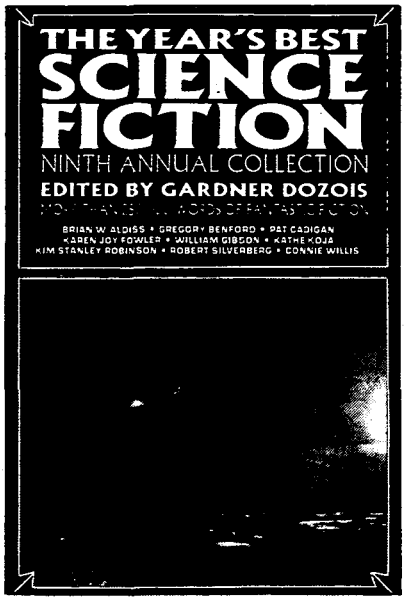
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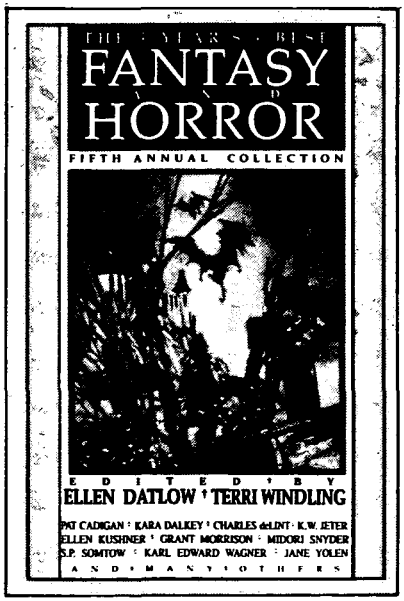
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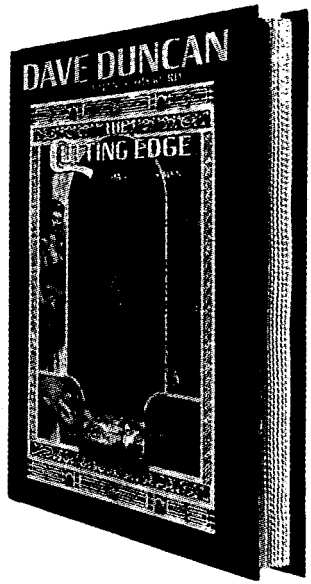

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

ON MY long drives from my home in the mountains into town to get my mail, I listen to audio tapes. I usually listen to non-fiction. I find fiction too engrossing (and therefore too dangerous to listen to while driving). Right now, I am "reading" *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius* by A. Scott Berg, a 1978 book published in an unabridged edition.

Many biographies of writers exist, but few biographies of editors do. I find the book fascinating for the insights it gives into both sides of my career — in fact, when I get out of the car, I often regale anyone I can find with the tidbits I learned from that day's drive.

Maxwell Perkins worked at Charles Scribners and Sons for decades. He discovered most of the great writers of the twentieth century, at least those great writers taught in English classes, and published in classic editions. F. Scott Fitzgerald was the first great Perkins discovery, followed by Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe and many others. Perkins was an editor of genius, for the writers he chose and for the ways he worked with them.

But the biography examines more than Perkins' work habits and the details of his personal life. It also chronicles the history of a writing generation. And there I find the similarities to modern day science fiction comforting.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, arrived over the transom at Scribners. The conservative, older editors did not like it because of its modern tone and unconventional point of view. They felt the reading public would not accept so radical a book.

Perkins knew that the public needed change, needed someone to speak for the generation coming up, so he fought for Fitzgerald's novel. Fitzgerald had to rewrite the book and struggle with point by

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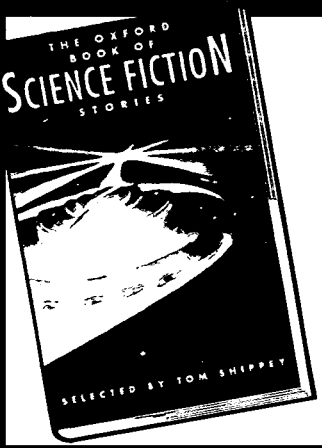

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point objections from the senior staff members at Scribners. But the book came out and sold past its projected volume *in the first week.*

As Fitzgerald's career progressed, he met other writers working in the business. He introduced Perkins to the writings of Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. Lardner, Hemingway, and Wolfe, in turn, sent other writers Perkins' way. And Perkins' stable grew, along with his editing talent and his list of credentials.

Perkins did not discover each great writer by pulling a manuscript out of a slush pile. Instead, he found one, and the others followed. Writers congregate, and new writers use the skills and contacts of the older writers to open doors. This isn't always the case. Some writers, like Fitzgerald, open those doors themselves. But writers travel in overlapping sets and groups, and like other business people, they network. They don't share voices or styles or tones. Instead they argue over theories of literature and trade business tidbits.

Listening to the book as I put this issue together brought many things home to me. I feel as if we have, in this issue, a representative sample of the way that writer generations overlap. Jack Williamson, who published his first short story in Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* in 1928, appears here along with Charles de Lint, whose work first saw print a little over a decade ago. Joe Haldeman, whose writing career began in the early seventies, shares these pages with Algis Budrys, whose first stories appeared in the 1950s.

The intermingling careers and influences among even those four writers are too complex for me to deal with here. That kind of literary history belongs in personal reminiscences such as Damon Knight's *The Futurians* and Frederik Pohl's *The Way the Future Was* or in books of literary criticism like Norman Spinrad's *Science Fiction in the Real World* or Brian Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree.* But the intermingling, the influences, and the contacts exist in ways too strange sometimes to be described in a paragraph.

Editors still pick new writers from slush piles, and established writers bring newer ones into the fold. The good writers change with each passing year while never losing their distinctive styles, and good editors look for the voices of new generations. Readers take risks with those new voices and pass them to friends. Then, as now, the best advertisement is word of mouth.

These things are good for the genre, and for literature in general. As long as new voices enter, and

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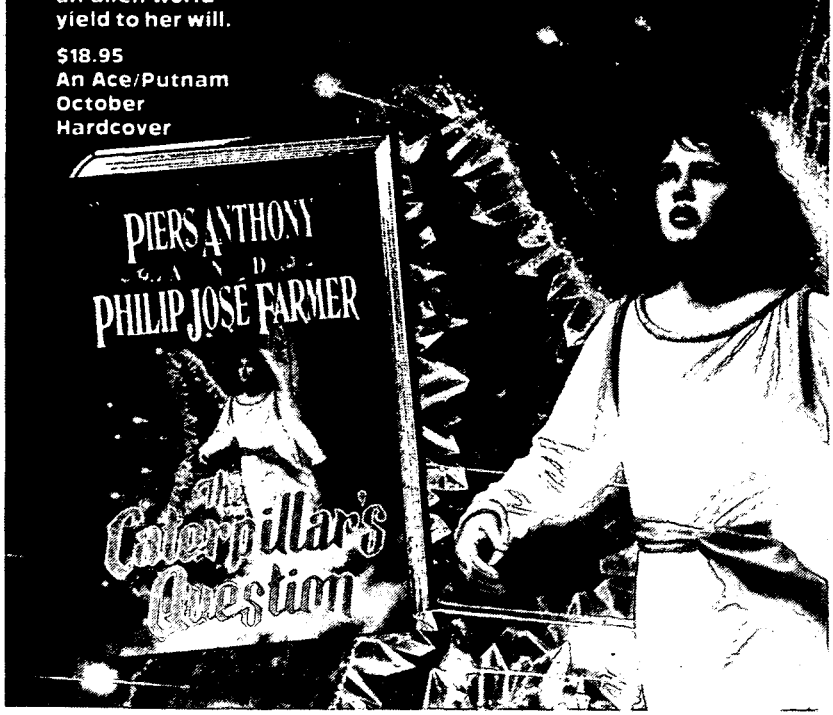

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the more established voices mature, fiction remains as fresh as the story told in the first language.

As I listen, I also reflect on the fact that I once thought audio books a travesty because they didn't duplicate the experience of reading a real book. Now audio books give me an added hour of reading enjoyment almost every day. Perhaps, by the time we celebrate our eighty-sixth anniversary, *F&SF* will be available in a form we can't even visualize today. But I am convinced that the human interaction among writers, readers and editors, that essential loop in which each strengthens the other, will continue, even then.

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Joe Haldeman won the Hugo and Nebula awards last year for his novella, "The Hemingway Hoax." William Morrow released his most recent novel, Worlds Enough and Time, *in May. Avon will publish the paperback, along with the other two books in the series (*Worlds *and* Worlds Apart*), in 1993. About "Graves," Joe writes, "In Vietnam I was a demolition engineer attached to various infantry companies, and out in the field I carried a demolition bag, full of stuff like fuses and high explosives, which were safe, and blasting caps, which were not. I typically had a box of fifty blasting caps in the bag, and I was sure some days a stray bullet would hit it, and it would be Joe All Over. It wouldn't even take a bullet; just falling down on a rock or having somebody be careless with a cigarette. That fear provided the only recurring dream I've ever had, or dream image: for several years I occasionally dreamed I was running down a jungle trail, unarmed, with a black-pyjamaed Viet Cong in hot pursuit . . . throwing burning cigarettes at me."*

The dream image is slapstick, but born of fear. "Graves" — born of the same fear — is anything but funny.

Graves

By Joe Haldeman

I HAVE THIS persistent sleep disorder that makes life difficult for me, but still I want to keep it. Boy, do I want to keep it. It goes back twenty years, to Vietnam. To Graves.

Dead bodies turn from bad to worse real fast in the jungle. You've got a few hours before rigor mortis makes them hard to handle, hard to stuff in a bag. By that time, they start to turn greenish, if they started out white or yellow, where you can see the skin. It's mostly bugs by then, usually ants. Then they go to black and start to smell.

They swell up and burst.

You'd think the ants and roaches and beetles and millipedes would make short work of them after that, but they don't. Just when they get to

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looking and smelling the worst, the bugs sort of lose interest, get fastidious, send out for pizza. Except for the flies. Laying eggs.

The funny thing is, unless some big animal got to it and tore it up, even after a week or so, you've still got something more than a skeleton, even a sort of a face. No eyes, though. Every now and then, we'd get one like that. Not too often, since soldiers usually don't die alone and sit there for that long, but sometimes. We called them "dry ones." Still damp underneath, of course, and inside, but kind of like a sunburned mummy otherwise.

You tell people what you do at Graves Registration, "Graves," and it sounds like about the worst job the army has to offer. It isn't. You just stand there all day and open body bags, figure out which parts maybe belong to which dog tag — not that it's usually that important — sew them up more or less with a big needle, account for all the wallets and jewelry, steal the dope out of their pockets, box them up, seal the casket, do the paperwork. When you have enough boxes, you truck them out to the airfield. The first week maybe is pretty bad. But after a hundred or so, after you get use to the smell and the god-awful feel of them, you get to thinking that opening a body bag is a lot better than ending up inside one. They put Graves in safe places.

Since I'd had a couple years of college, premed, I got some of the more interesting jobs. Captain French, who was the pathologist actually in charge of the outfit, always took me with him out into the field when he had to examine a corpse in situ, which happened only maybe once a month. I got to wear a .45 in a shoulder holster, tough guy. Never fired it, never got shot at, except the one time.

That was a hell of a time. It's funny what gets to you, stays with you.

Usually when we had an in situ, it was a forensic matter, like an officer they suspected had been fragged or otherwise terminated by his own men. We'd take pictures and interview some people, and then Frenchy would bring the stiff back for autopsy, see whether the bullets were American or Vietnamese. (Not that that would be conclusive either way. The Vietcong stole our weapons, and our guys used the North Vietnamese AK-47s, when we could get our hands on them. More reliable than the M-16, and a better cartidge for killing. Both sides proved that over and over.) Usually Frenchy would send a report up to Division, and that would be it. Once he had to testify at a court-martial. The kid was guilty, but just got life. The officer

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was a real prick.

Anyhow, we got the call to come look at this in situ corpse about five in the afternoon. Frenchy tried to put it off until the next day, since if it got dark, we'd have to spend the night. The guy he was talking to was a major, though, and obviously proud of it, so it was no use arguing. I threw some C's and beer and a couple canteens into two rucksacks that already had blankets and air mattresses tied on the bottom. Box of .45 ammo and a couple hand grenades. Went and got a jeep while Frenchy got his stuff together and made sure Doc Carter was sober enough to count the stiffs as they came in. (Doc Carter was the one supposed to be in charge, but he didn't much care for the work.)

Drove us out to the pad, and lo and behold, there was a chopper waiting, blades idling. Should've started to smell a rat then. We don't get real high priority, and it's not easy to get a chopper to go anywhere so close to sundown. They even helped us stow our gear. Up, up and away.

I never flew enough in helicopters to make it routine. Kontum looked almost pretty in the low sun, golden red. I had to sit between two flamethrowers, though, which didn't make me feel too secure. The door gunner was smoking. The flamethrower tanks were stenciled NO SMOKING.

We went fast and low out toward the mountains to the west. I was hoping we'd wind up at one of the big fire bases up there, figuring I'd sleep better with a few hundred men around. But no such luck. When the chopper started to slow down, the blades' whir deepening to a whuck-whuck-whuck, there was no clearing as far as the eye could see. Thick jungle canopy everywhere. Then a wisp of purple smoke showed us a helicopter-sized hole in the leaves. The pilot brought us down an inch at a time, nicking twigs. I was very much aware of the flamethrowers. If he clipped a large branch, we'd be so much pot roast.

When we touched down, four guys in a big hurry unloaded our gear and the flamethrowers and a couple cases of ammo. They put two wounded guys and one client on board and shooed the helicopter away. Yeah, it would sort of broadcast your position. One of them told us to wait; he'd go get the major.

"I don't like this at all," Frenchy said.

"Me neither," I said. "Let's go home."

"Any outfit that's got a major and two flamethrowers is planning to

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fight a real war." He pulled his .45 out and looked at it as if he'd never seen one before. "Which end of this do you think the bullets come out of?"

"Shit," I advised, and rummaged through the rucksack for a beer. I gave Frenchy one, and he put it in his side pocket.

A machine gun opened up off to our right. Frenchy and I grabbed the dirt. Three grenade blasts. Somebody yelled for them to cut that out. Guy yelled back he thought he saw something. Machine gun started up again. We tried to get a little lower.

Up walks this old guy, thirties, looking annoyed. The major.

"You men get up. What's wrong with you?" He was playin' games.

Frenchy got up, dusting himself off. We had the only clean fatigues in twenty miles. "Captain French, Graves Registration."

"Oh," he said, not visibly impressed. "Secure your gear and follow me." He drifted off like a mighty ship of the jungle. Frenchy rolled his eyes, and we hoisted our rucksacks and followed him. I wasn't sure whether "secure your gear" meant bring your stuff or leave it behind, but Budweiser could get to be a real collector's item in the boonies, and there were a lot of collectors out here.

We walked too far. I mean a couple hundred yards. That meant they were really spread out thin. I didn't look forward to spending the night. The goddamned machine gun started up again. The major looked annoyed and shouted, "Sergeant, will you please control your men?", and the sergeant told the machine gunner to shut the fuck up, and the machine gunner told the sergeant there was a fuckin' gook out there, and then somebody popped a big one, like a Claymore, and then everybody was shooting every which way. Frenchy and I got real horizontal. I heard a bullet whip by over my head. The major was leaning against a tree, looking bored, shouting, "Cease firing, cease firing!" The shooting dwindled down like popcorn getting done. The major looked over at us and said, "Come on. While there's still light." He led us into a small clearing, elephant grass pretty well trampled down. I guess everybody had had his turn to look at the corpse.

It wasn't a real gruesome body, as bodies go, but it was odd-looking, even for a dry one. Moldy, like someone had dusted flour over it. Naked and probably male, though incomplete: all the soft parts were gone. Tall; one of our Montagnard allies rather than an ethnic Vietnamese. Emaciated, dry skin taut over ribs. Probably old, though it doesn't take long for these

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people to get old. Lying on its back, mouth wide open, a familiar posture. Empty eye sockets staring skyward. Arms flung out in supplication, loosely, long past rigor mortis.

Teeth chipped and filed to points, probably some Montagnard tribal custom. I'd never seen it before, but we didn't "do" many natives.

Frenchy knelt down and reached for it, then stopped. "Checked for booby traps?"

"No," the major said. "Figure that's your job." Frenchy looked at me with an expression that said it was my job.

Both officers stood back a respectful distance while I felt under the corpse. Sometimes they pull the pin on a hand grenade and slip it under the body so that the body's weight keeps the arming lever in place. You turn it over, and *Tomato Surprise!*

I always worry less about a hand grenade than about the various weird serpents and bugs that might enjoy living underneath a decomposing corpse. Vietnam has its share of snakes and scorpions and megapedes.

I was lucky this time; nothing but maggots. I flicked them off my hand and watched the major turn a little green. People are funny. What does he think is going to happen to him when he dies? Everything has to eat. And he was sure as hell going to die if he didn't start keeping his head down. I remember that thought, but didn't think of it then as a prophecy.

They came over. "What do you make of it, Doctor?"

"I don't think we can cure him." Frenchy was getting annoyed at this cherry bomb. "What else do you want to know?"

"Isn't it a little . . . *odd* to find something like this in the middle of nowhere?"

"Naw. Country's full of corpses." He knelt down and studied the face, wiggling the head by its chin. "We keep it up, you'll be able to walk from the Mekong to the DMZ without stepping on anything but corpses."

"But he's been castrated!"

"Birds." He toed the body over, busy white crawlers running from the light. "Just some old geezer who walked out into the woods naked and fell over dead. Could happen back in the World. Old people do funny things."

"I thought maybe he'd been tortured by the VC or something."

"God knows. It could happen." The body eased back into its original position with a creepy creaking sound, like leather. Its mouth had closed halfway. "If you want to put 'evidence of VC torture' in your report, your

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body count, I'll initial it."

"What do you mean by that, Captain?"

"Exactly what I said." He kept staring at the major while he flipped a cigarette into his mouth and fired it up. Nonfilter Camels; you'd think a guy who worked with corpses all day long would be less anxious to turn into one. "I'm just trying to get along."

"You believe I want you to falsify —"

Now, "falsify" is a strange word for a last word. The enemy had set up a heavy machine gun on the other side of the clearing, and we were the closest targets. A round struck the major in the small of his back, we found on later examination. At the time, it was just an explosion of blood and guts, and he went down with his legs flopping every which way, barfing, then loud death rattle. Frenchy was on the ground in a ball, holding his left hand, going, "Shit shit shit." He'd lost the last joint of his little finger. Painful, but not serious enough, as it turned out, to get him back to the World.

I myself was horizontal and aspiring to be subterranean. I managed to get my pistol out and cocked, but realized I didn't want to do anything that might draw attention to us. The machine gun was spraying back and forth over us at about knee height. Maybe they couldn't see us; maybe they thought we were dead. I was scared shitless.

"Frenchy," I stage-whispered, "we've got to get outa here." He was trying to wrap his finger up in a standard first-aid-pack gauze bandage, much too large. "Get back to the trees."

"After you, asshole. We wouldn't get halfway." He worked his pistol out of the holster, but couldn't cock it, his left hand clamping the bandage and slippery with blood. I armed it for him and handed it back. "These are going to do a hell of a lot of good. How are you with grenades?"

"Shit. How you think I wound up in Graves?" In basic training, they'd put me on KP whenever they went out for live grenade practice. In school, I was always the last person when they chose up sides for baseball, for the same reason — though, to my knowledge, a baseball wouldn't kill you if you couldn't throw far enough. "I couldn't get one halfway there." The tree line was about sixty yards away.

"Neither could I, with this hand." He was a lefty.

Behind us came the "poink" sound of a sixty-millimeter mortar, and in a couple of seconds, there was a gray-smoke explosion between us and the

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tree line. The machine gun stopped, and somebody behind us yelled, "Add twenty!"

At the tree line, we could hear some shouting in Vietnamese, and a clanking of metal. "They're gonna bug out," Frenchy said. "Let's di-di."

We got up and ran, and somebody did fire a couple of bursts at us, probably an AK-47, but he missed, and then there were a series of poinks and a series of explosions pretty close to where the gun had been.

We rushed back to the LZ and found the command group, about the time the firing started up again. There was a first lieutenant in charge, and when things slowed down enough for us to tell him what had happened to the major, he expressed neither surprise nor grief. The man had been an observer from Battalion, and had assumed command when their captain was killed that morning. He'd take our word for it that the guy was dead —that was one thing we were trained observers in — and not send a squad out for him until the fighting had died down and it was light again.

We inherited the major's hole, which was nice and deep, and in his rucksack found a dozen cans and jars of real food and a flask of scotch. So, as the battle raged through the night, we munched pâté on Ritz crackers, pickled herring in sour-cream sauce, little Polish sausages on party rye with real French mustard. We drank all the scotch and saved the beer for breakfast.

For hours the lieutenant called in for artillery and air support, but to no avail. Later we found out that the enemy had lauched coordinated attacks on all the local airfields and Special Forces camps, and every camp that held POWs. We were much lower priority.

Then, about three in the morning, Snoopy came over. Snoopy was a big C-130 cargo plane that carried nothing but ammunition and Gatling guns; they said it could fly over a football field and put a round into every square inch. Anyhow, it saturated the perimeter with fire, and the enemy stopped shooting. Frenchy and I went to sleep.

At first light, we went out to help round up the KIAs. There were only four dead, counting the major, but the major was an astounding sight, at least in context.

He looked sort of like a cadaver left over from a teaching autopsy. His shirt had been opened and his pants pulled down to his thighs, and the entire thoracic and abdominal cavities had been ripped open and emptied of everything soft, everything from esophagus to testicles, rib cage like

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blood-streaked fingers sticking rigid out of sagging skin, and there wasn't a sign of any of the guts anywhere, just a lot of dried blood.

Nobody had heard anything. There was a machine-gun position not twenty yards away, and they'd been straining their ears all night. All they'd heard was flies.

Maybe an animal feeding very quietly. The body hadn't been opened with a scalpel or a knife; the skin had been torn by teeth or claws — but seemingly systematically, throat to balls.

And the dry one was gone. Him with the pointed teeth.

There is one rational explanation. Modern warfare is partly mindfuck, and we aren't the only ones who do it, dropping unlucky cards, invoking magic and superstition. The Vietnamese knew how squeamish Americans were, and would mutilate bodies in clever ways. They could also move very quietly. The dry one? They might have spirited him away just to fuck with us. Show what they could do under our noses.

And as for the dry one's odd mummified appearance, the mold, there might be an explanation. I found out that the Montagnards in that area don't bury their dead; they put them in a coffin made from a hollowed-out log and leave them aboveground. So maybe he was just the victim of a grave robber. I thought the nearest village was miles away, like twenty miles, but I could have been wrong. Or the body could have been carried that distance for some obscure purpose — maybe the VC set it out on the trail to make the Americans stop in a good place to be ambushed.

That's probably it. But for twenty years now, several nights a week, I wake up sweating with a terrible image in my mind. I've gone out with a flashlight, and there it is, the dry one, scooping steaming entrails from the major's body, tearing them with its sharp teeth, staring into my light with black empty sockets, unconcerned. I reach for my pistol, and it's never there. The creature stands up, shiny with blood, and takes a step toward me — for a year or so, that was it; I would wake up. Then it was two steps, and then three. After twenty years it has covered half the distance and its dripping hands are raising from its sides.

The doctor gives me tranquilizers. I don't take them. They might help me stay asleep.

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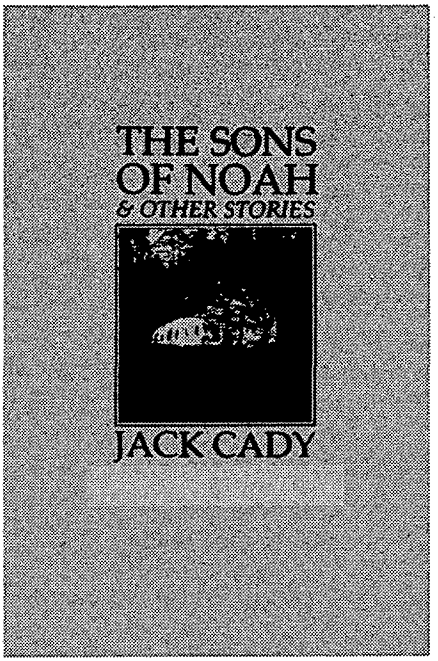

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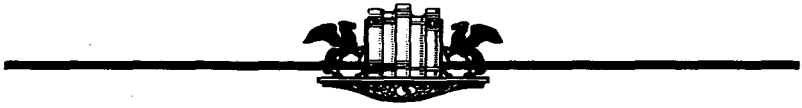

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

No Deeper Sea, Alexander Jablokov (Morrow/ AvoNova, cloth, 368pp, $22.00)

JABLOKOV'S FIRST novel, *Carve the Sky*, was brilliant and mature. *No Deeper Sea*, however, bears the earmarks of being either an early work, refurbished and updated (to fit the new world situation), or a hurried recent work. Why does it seem so? Because so much of the story is skipped over and left undeveloped; because it lacks the maturity and richness of *Carve the Sky*.

So, his second novel (or maybe an earlier novel that happened to be published second) isn't a masterpiece. Is it *good*?

Let's say this: I've seen a lot of sentimental claptrap about dolphins and whales and how intelligent and beautiful they are, but Jablokov hasn't a trace of sentimentality toward delphine, orcan, or cetacean cultures. In fact, he has the best sf ideas I've seen about what kind of culture, lore, society, and thought might actually be going on with these alien species, as well as a great sense-of-wonder account of the time when dolphins first talked to men, and why they stopped, and why they start again.

If this novel were nothing *but* the story of the dolphins and the rather interesting people who speak to them, exploit them, and finally (after a fashion) free them, then I would be raving about this book the way I raved about *Carve the Sky*.

Unfortunately, Jablokov has kitchen-sinked this one a bit, by having the culmination of the novel be a voyage to Jupiter, where a cyborgized right whale has something to do with making contact (vaguely) with the Jovian aliens. While Jablokov introduced the idea of Jovian aliens early on in the book and does a mechanically correct job of keeping the idea alive, the

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fact is that it *still* feels as though it's grafted on. Furthermore, where his writing about dolphins was clear, his narrative gets murky once we get to Jupiter, and he seems to think we not only know more but care more than in fact we do.

In short, the thing doesn't hang together; the whole is less than the sum of its parts. But the parts are so fine, some of them! There are scenes that you must see: The prison-camp passages; the ocean war near the Aleutians; the moment when a beleaguered, tortured dolphin finally speaks to human beings once again; the moment in a razored cage, nearly underwater, when the hero sets the dolphins free. These are so powerful and true that even if Jablokov did not pull them together well, you owe it to yourself to bring these ideas and images, these people and these tales, into your memory.

This is an ambitious novel; to do it properly, Jablokov needed twice the pages and, I daresay, twice the experience at novel-making. But one of the nice things about our genre — and one of the dangerous things, for writers — is that our education as storytellers often takes place in public, with everybody watching. Now we know that Jablokov is one of those writers who sometimes bites off more than he can chew. That means he's worth paying attention to, even when, in part at least, he fails. Why? Because there are such bright flashes even in the failures; and because he will not always fail.

The White Mists of Power, Kristine Kathryn Rusch (Penguin/NAL/Roc, paper, 302pp, $3.99)

So Rusch is now the editor of this magazine. That doesn't change the fact that before that happy day she was a much-published short story writer who won the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer. I happen to think that is a very prescient award, and I would have read Rusch's first novel even if she were *not* the editor of *F&SF*. And, having read it, I would have reviewed it, because I try to tell you about every book I read that will reward you for having read it, and *The White Mists of Power* definitely qualifies.

Besides, do you think that I'd compromise my integrity in order to suck up to the editor of a magazine that pays me only a hundred bucks a month? I'm not sure that my integrity is unassailable, but I *can* promise you that my price is a hell of a lot higher than *that*.

So here is the review I would have written whether Rusch was editing this or not:

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I'm not a fan of fantasy stories that express magical power in terms of "mists" or "fogs." Nor am I really thrilled with prologues in which we see enigmatic and portentous scenes that probably won't make sense for about two hundred pages. Nor do I get all goo-goo-eyed the way some people do at the mere mention of a bard; indeed, I'm quite sick of bards in fiction and have resolved that the next time I do a medieval story, every bard that shows up at the castle gates will be driven off with stones and jeers.

The White Mists of Power has a bard. It has a portentous prologue that makes no sense until you've read on for two hundred pages. It has misty magic. Which just goes to show you how much *my* rules are worth, when a masterful writer is at work. Because Rusch *is* a masterful writer; this story *did* manage to overcome all the strikes against it in this biased reader's mind; and in the end I couldn't wait to tell you about this book because Rusch has not only done better than she needed to in order to get a fantasy novel published in the current market, she has actually done *well.*

It's a land where the nobility spend their time trying to steal each other's land through marriage, murder, or other political maneuvers, while politely ignoring each other's fetishes — like Lord Dakin's habit of setting his enemies free in a swamp, to be hunted down and torn to pieces by his dogs. That's what Dakin attempts with Byron, a bard who is reputed to be a murderer of an innocent young lady some ten years before, and who has definitely had some involvement with revolutionary movements among the common folk. But out in the woods, Byron's life is saved by a talentless young magician named Seymour who works the first really successful spell of his life in order to do it.

The story proceeds from there as a grand adventure — encounters in inns and castles, strange conspiracies. And as the story proceeds, we keep waiting for the story of Byron and Seymour to link up with the story of Adric, the king's son, who has been stranded deliberately in the city, where of course no one believes that he is who he is. And I promise you that the stories *do* link up, though so late in the story that you begin to wonder whether this is only volume one of a series, because there's no possible way that with so *few* pages left the author can make these two stories come together. But she does, oh yes, and quite deftly — and no, I will *not* tell you how.

Working with the threads of cliché, Rusch spins a story that is

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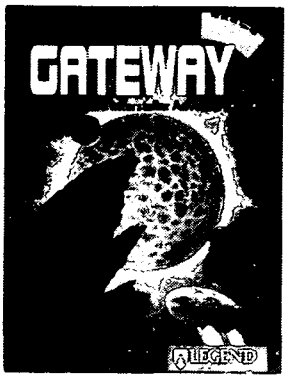

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fresh and surprising. She also creates strong heroes. Not deep characters, for they are not needed in event-driven Romance. Rather the character of these men and women is revealed by what they do — and what they do is deft and subtle at least as often as it is brutal and direct.

Some editors, when they write, make you wish they had spent more time editing. But when this novel came together, it made me wish that Rusch were not spending so much time editing. A writer only grows by writing, and as good as Rusch is now, with this first novel, I don't think it's fair that it will take us twenty years to see just how good she would have been in ten years if only she had written more.

Buddy Holly Is Alive and Well on Ganymede, Bradley Denton (Morrow, cloth, 357pp, $22.00)

Never mind that this novel is funny and satirical without ever losing the human touch, that the characters can be absurd without our ever ceasing to believe in them or care about them, that Denton's plot, silly as it is, has a strong integrity that holds the satire together as well as Vonnegut at his best. Never mind that this novel works even if you don't give a rat's ass for Buddy Holly or fifties rock'n'roll. You should read *Buddy Holly Is Alive and Well on Ganymede* because it's some of the best damn writing I've ever seen in our field. I started reading this book at a science fiction convention in Austin and couldn't put it down till I finished it; at a panel the next day, to prove a point, I opened the book at random and read the first paragraph that caught my eye and it was brilliant. Even the *filler* paragraphs, even the expository *lumps* are a model of lucidity and attitude and revelation of character.

So: Buy this book. Borrow this book. Heck, *steal* this book — that's the only way the author is sure of getting his royalties anyway. Denton is already one of our best writers and he's only just started and he looks so achingly young that he's probably going to outlive us all and just get better all the time and even though that makes me want to puke with envy I still have to tell you that if you don't read this book now, you'll slap yourself silly later, when you think of all the years you missed seeing the world through Denton's eyes.

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Gene Wolfe makes a welcome return to these pages with "The Legend of Xi Cygnus." He has won a World Fantasy award for his collection, Storeys From the Old Hotel, *and has published a number of novels, the most recent of which,* The Castle of Days, *will be published by TOR in December. "The Legend of Xi Cygnus" is a beautifully written, off-beat tale that mixes legend and science, fantasy and science fiction as only Gene Wolfe can do.*

The Legend of Xi Cygnus

By Gene Wolfe

IN THE FALL SKY, not long after sundown, you may see Cygnus the swan, which the Greeks called Ornis. In its right wing is the small yellow star that the Arabs (the only people to have named it as far as I know) call Gienah. Its legend is ancient, having reached us at the speed of light.

A small world circling that star was ruled by a giant. To be sure, he was not such a giant as we have here, a giant with eyes and arms and legs all like a man's, only larger. But he was a giant indeed among his own kind, both huge and strong, and so we will call him that. Like most giants, he was inclined to be tolerant and rather lazy; but like other giants, too, he could be roused to anger, and his size and strength were so great that when thus roused he was terrible indeed. The legend concerns him, his life, and his death.

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There was, upon the world ruled by this giant, a race of Dwarves, numerous, malevolent, and proud, much given to cruel jests and small thefts, the bane of the Centaurs, the Sylphs, the Demons, and all the other peoples of that world, detested and feared. And so it was that when the giant had at last unified it under his rule, he punished these Dwarves severely, to the applauce of all those whom they had so long vexed and despoiled. Their fortresses, castles, citadels, and other strong places he pulled down, so that they might no longer mock their neighbors from their ramparts. Into the many mouths of their mines (which were rich and extensive, and very deep) he directed the waters of a hundred rivers and streams.

Nor was that all. He burned their towns and villages, gave over their flocks and their herds to the bears and the wolves, returned their fields to the herbs and the thronging wildflowers from which they had been taken, and set free the bondsmen who had worked them. Lastly, he caused all of the Dwarves to be counted; and finding them too many, with his own hand he slew every tenth.

This done, he declared their chastisement at an end; but in order that they might never return to their evil ways, he made them his slaves, to sweep and scrub his palace, hoe and manure his flower beds, catch, cook, and serve his food, and answer his door; and very busy he kept them, that they might have no time for evildoing.

That they hated him goes without saying. Whispering one to another while they labored, by nod and wink and gesture and secret word, they brewed the First Plot. Thus it was that one cold winter night, while the giant slept, a hundred of their largest, strongest, and most courageous entered his bedchamber with scythes, cleavers, pruning hooks, pickaxes, and such-like implements. Five stood at each foot to cut the tendon there, and five more at each hand. Forty took their places upon his belly, ready at the signal agreed-upon to plunge their weapons into his vitals. On either side of his neck there waited twenty more, the chiefs and bullies of the whole hundred, to cut the giant's throat. On them was the greatest reliance placed.

When each was well positioned, the strongest and slyest of them all gave the signal. His trumpeter put lip to horn and blew a mighty blast; and at the sound, all hundred struck as one. Then were broadaxe and hatchet laid to tendon, and sickle, shears, and saw to artery! Scarlet blood spurted

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to the ceiling of that high chamber, till every Dwarf was dyed with it, and the sheet, and coverlet, and pillow, too, until the tallest stood knee keep in the hot reeking rush of it, and those small creatures that dwell in the blood of those who live upon that world of the star called by Arabs Gienah clambered out of it, rosy or pale, and clung to the skirts, and beards, and faces of the Dwarves, murmuring and muttering with soft tongues in an unknown speech, and in that fashion saying many things that no one could know.

Then the giant waked, and rose roaring. Those Dwarves who were yet in his bedchamber when he slammed shut its great door, he slew. And when day came, he most carefully examined all the rest, blinding any upon whom he discovered the least trace of his blood. And lastly, he declared an end to the stipend he had previously granted to each Dwarf for bread and meat. Thenceforward they were made to beg those who had been their victims in times past for peelings and stale crusts, and were made to work harder than ever, toiling for the giant from the first light of the star that the Arabs call Gienah until the last stall in the market closed.

That they hated him goes without saying. Year followed year, and in all those years there came not a night in which they did not dream of murder. To their children and their grandchildren they whispered of revenge about the fire, and they painted thier doorposts and lintels with certain uncouth signs, red or black, whose signification they themselves well understood.

At last the giant grew old. His step was no longer so quick as it had been, nor his voice so loud, nor his eyes so keen. He fell ill, and when word of it went abroad, Shee and Sidhe, Fairy and Sprite, Kobold, Nisse, and Centaur, Goblin and Demon trooped to his palace, bringing with them gifts they hoped might bring him pleasure: hams smoked with rare woods, so great in size that no champion of the Trolls could lift one to his shoulder; tuns brimming with wine, ale, and strong beer; salt whales, their tails in their mouths, with pickled melons for eyes; perfumes in crystal and incense in thuribles hollowed from diamonds, and with these many meadows of blossoms: yellow, red, incarnadine, mauve, and celestine. And weapons of hammered steel, chased with gold. The old giant received them in the Great Court and blessed them, smiled upon them, spoke with them for a time, and sent them away. Sadly they returned to their own

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homes and countries, there to pray for him, and sacrifice, and sing.

But the Dwarves, seeing how many, and how vast and rich, were the gifts that had been brought him, and seeing too that he himself was no longer the great and terrible foe of whom their fathers had spoken, then contrived the Second Plot.

And when the last Nixie had departed, leaving behind her gift of silver foam, and the giant dozed in his chair, they heaped about it all the wood that they could gather — that which had been meant to feed the palace fires, and furniture, and precious painted carvings, too, the work of the great xyloglyphists of old, whereby might be seen many a figure quaint yet imbued with a curious grace, and even the sticks and stumps of their own huts, with all their thatching and daubed doorposts. And to all this mass, which at last rose higher than the giant's waist, they put fire in a score of places.

So terrified were they of the giant, that the first had fled before the last torch was applied. Yet some few stayed behind to watch — a dozen (or so the legend reports) through the crevice of a certain door, half a hundred peering between the petals and leaves of the hills of blossoms, each thinking himself or herself alone.

Up climbed the smoke, and the flames after it. Burned through, some accidental prop in the mountainous pile of heaped wood broke, and half the whole shifted with a grinding roar, so that a column of sparks vied for a time with all the watching stars.

At last the giant stirred, and blinked, and closed his great, slow eyes again. Perhaps he heard the twittering of the Dwarves' distress through the crackling of the flames. Perhaps not. However that may have been, it is certain that he shouted so loudly that the very walls of his palace shook, rose and kicked the fire apart, and with a half-burned brand for a club hunted and slew all he found that night, battering the trees till showers of Dwarves dropped like ripe fruit, and stamping, stamping, stamping, until scarcely one of the fallen Dwarves still drew breath.

When the kindly light of that star which the Arabs called Gienah returned, however, he took to his bed, and summoned physicians from among the Centaurs, who are famous healers. These buttered his many burns with ointments, peered into his eyes, examined his great tongue as so many merchants might a carpet, and stamped upon his chest in order that each might know for himself, through all his feet, the beating of that mighty heart.

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And when all that had been done, they shook their heads, and spoke brave words of comfort and encouragement, and went away.

For eight days and eight nights, those Dwarves who yet lived waited outside the giant's bedchamber door with food and drink, and spoke among themselves of poisons (though none dared to fetch them), and turned back such Peris, Ouphes, and Titans as would have brought the giant comfort if they could. On the ninth day, however, a great Worm, white and blind and thicker through the body than any Dwarf, wriggled from beneath the door of the giant's bedchamber.

They entered, first a few pushed foward by the rest, and afterward the whole of them, or rather all that remained alive. This they called the Third Plot. They climbed his sheets, explored the great foul cavern of his open mouth, danced clogs and reels where the Centaurs had stamped, and pierced and slashed his blind eyes again and again with hedge bills and pokers. Then they carved those rude signs that they had aforetime scrawled upon their own doorposts and lintels into the dead giant's forehead, and nose, and cheeks, slicing away the putrescent flesh with their knives until each sign stood out boldly in sullen, weeping crimson. And when the last had been cut deep, they emptied their bowels and bladders wherever they stood, each boasting of what he had done, and where he had done it, and telling the rest how in years to come Dwarf children yet unborn would learn, when they were come to the age of understanding, what he, their ancestor had once done, and glory in it.

Thus they were speaking when the thundrous voice came. So mighty it was that it filled every hall and chamber of the palace; and its first word dashed the pictures from the walls so that their crash and smash added to the roar, though they were lost in it.

Its second word broke all the crockery in the palace and set the shards to sliding like screes of stones, so that they burst open cabinets and cupboards and descended to the floors in avalanches.

Its third word toppled all the statues along the broad avenue that led up to the Great Gate; its fourth stopped the fountain and snapped off both arms of the marble nymph who blessed the waters; and its fifth cracked the basin itself.

Its sixth, seventh and eighth words maddened every cat in the place, struck dead seventeen bat-winged black rooks of the flock that swept the sky about the Grand Campanile, and set all the bells to ringing.

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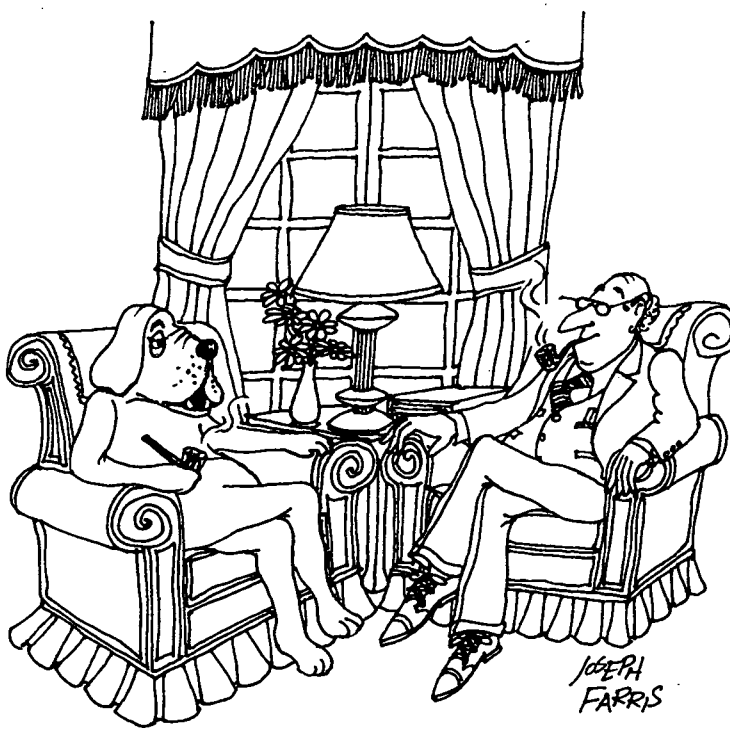
Its ninth soured every cask in the cellars, while its tenth word stove them in. Its eleventh stopped the clocks and started the hounds to howling.

Its twelfth and last (which was an especially big word) knocked the Dwarves off their feet and sent every one of them rolling and somersaulting amongst all their foulnesses while they held their ears and screeched.

And what that voice said was, *"What vermin are these who dare defile the body of a Giant!"*

Oh, my friends! Let us of this star, who are ourselves but Dwarves, heed well the warning.



"Sure, I can talk but I still feel culturally illiterate."

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John Brunner has written a number of posthumous collaborations. This time, he links pens with one of the premier Latin American fantasists to produce this wonderful tale.

The Dead Man

A posthumous collaboration

By John Brunner and

J*rge Ls B*rg*s**

IT WAS BEYOND the Rio Galaz, there were the pampa lies like a dirty brown blanket spread by a sleepy gaucho with hares leaping on it in place of fleas, that I first heard rumors of the man who, though he walked and breathed, was surely dead. His name was variously Enero or Anaquel, Retrato or Rosario, but I sensed as the story was recounted in one farm kitchen, one grimy cantina after another that my interlocutors knew what he should properly be called; only, they feared to let the syllables pass their lips.

On an evening when a storm was about to break, I came to a drab town whose name I will not here write down. It's priest gave me shelter. An elderly woman — silent, brown, gap-toothed — served us tortillas, charred beef and hard undercooked beans washed down with sour beer. Afterward the priest said as he bent to light one of my last three cigars at the chimney of an oil lamp with a tarnished brass reservoir, ""You will have come because of Lazarus."

"What makes you say so?" I reposted, even as I mastered my relief at finally hearing the right name.

"Because no one visits us for any other reason, save those who are weary

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of the pampa, and a few traveling salesmen. You are neither. In the morning, you can meet him, if you like. Do you wish to hear his story?"

"Is he truly called Lazarus?"

"Of course not."

"Please continue."

He certainly had a name once — he was baptized — but no one speaks it anymore. He does not even utter it himself. His mother died in bearing him; his father expired from fever some years after; a cousin took him in. He grew up like any other boy in our part of the country, learning to ride almost before he could walk, knowing more of cattle than of humankind.

The cousin having sons of his own, he must endure subordinate status, especially with respect to the oldest son, Luis, who was the same age. He became taller and stronger and — no question — more intelligent, but until he was seventeen, he contained his resentment, as though within him a powder train were burning under a disguise of dust.

Then his cousin and adoptive father considered him of an age to accompany the other men from the *estancia* into town, to drink and dance, to brag and maybe fight. It is the custom in this region. There are few distractions.

Within months, he was notorious. In the unfamiliar environment of the town, he revealed his true self. He invented fouler insults than anyone else, yet delivered them in such a calm and slumberous tone it was hard to take them seriously. Soon it was a point of honor among his companions to jeer at anyone who could not treat them as a joke. And that included Luis. It made no odds that occasionally when he and they departed, items of value were found to be missing, and now and then something remarkably similar was seen on that man's belt, that horse's bridle. . . . We had witnessed enough bloodshed in two wars. We were only glad that now they laughed, albeit with a vinegar mouth, instead of slashing one another with their eager knives.

That was before Incarnacion.

Yes, it is an ancient tale. Luis and he became rivals for the same girl. It was said, it was probable, that she accorded them equally generous favors — she was an orphan, too; she had no real alternative — but somehow, for quite a long while each remained ignorant of what she meant to the other.

In the end the secret came to light, and, having proved he was not only

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taller and stronger, but also faster, he left Luis lying in the dirt and rode away.

After that, nothing was heard of him for three years. We learned that a bandit had recruited disaffected men in the country to the north, and his gang was raiding lonely farms, rustling cattle, attacking coaches and even the railway. Also, they used women with brutality. But we had no proof that their leader was the man we had known.

During early Mass, Incarnacion, wearing only a nightgown, rushed screaming into the church to announce his return. I made haste to conclude the ceremony and ran outside without doffing my vestments. It was true. On a galled, lame horse, he was riding down the street, rigidly upright in his saddle. As it drew level with the church, the poor beast stumbled to a halt, and I saw that in its rider's chest, exactly level of his heart, there was a silver-hafted knife.

I recognized it. It had been stolen from this house.

He stared straight ahead, speechless, unmoving. I laid my hand on his, and found it cold yet moist, like a new-caught fish. I felt for the pulse in his wrist. There was none. To my dying day, I shall maintain he had no pulse. Also, his eyes were frozen open and saw nothing.

Other people, roused, had started to assemble, but neither they nor I were quick enough to stop Incarnacion. She cried out and snatched at the knife, and within a breath had turned it on herself. I had not imagined that she loved him. Sometimes I suspect she did not, but had loved Luis, and now hated the one who by being dead had cheated her of hoped-for vengeance. At all events, she fell to the ground, and he fell, too, upon the neck of his horse.

But she fell dead, and he fell alive. Moments later his blood began to flow.

There is no doctor here, but I have some medical knowledge, and there are *curanderas*, old women like my housekeeper who understand the use of herbs. A few days later, he was on his feet. He remained pale and said little. He made confession and spoke of evil deeds — I do not break the seal by saying this, for he has admitted them to others — and went away changed. Now he works meekly and very hard; what he is paid, he gives to the poor and the old; he eats what he gets and sleeps where he may. If he spends on anything, he buys flowers for Incarnacion's grave. There is no

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pride in him and no more lust or anger. Indeed, some say in death he went to paradise, and has returned an angel in the body of a man. But this I doubt.

The cigar had burned to a stub. The priest crushed it, rising.

"In the morning," he said, "you may meet him, and decide for yourself about angels."

I found him as he had been described: clad in cast-off garments and barefoot, very pale, reluctant to interrupt his work of carrying water in two wooden buckets. Perhaps he judged I was a little different from the ordinary run of sensation-seekers who had come to view this prodigy. Perhaps he regarded me as scholarly, and for that forgave my inquisitiveness. Who knows? All that matters is that after the offer of my last cigar — declined — he took me aside to where we might sit down, and said without further preamble, "Do you know what it is like to be dead?"

I shook my head.

"I cannot speak for those who die in peace," he said. His voice was thready, but his pronunciation was that of an educated man, which I had not expected. "I can only tell you how it is for one who dies by violence.

"Everything stops when it is worst. The moment when you realize what is happening. The moment when the pain of the wound becomes intolerable. Above all, the moment when you remember all the mistakes that led you to this death: not just the way you were misled by your killer's feint, so that you took your eye off his knife, but every error since you learned to talk — every lie and deception, every cruel act and mocking laugh, every deed that made another person hate you. Or mistrust you: that's as bad.

"And there, at the crux of this agony, everything, as I said, stops. Except thinking. Thinking goes on. It will go on for all eternity. It is a very cruel God that made our world. It is a God that wants to feel us suffer, and will never cease to invent new ways of doing so. Now you're a victim, too, like the priest. I told him what I've just told you, and he claimed not to believe me. How, he said, if God is evil, could I have been transformed from such a wicked man — a bandit, a murderer, a rapist — into the virtuous person that you see before you?"

I had been wondering the same, for in those days I retained some vestige of religious faith.

"It is to make you suffer as well," he said after a pause, making to rise.

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"Not that I think of it in that way. For me, what is important is this. By dying, I have experienced the total vileness that only our Creator can command. What point in petty sins and crimes that are so pale a shadow of the real thing?"

He turned to retrieve his water buckets.

"Wait!" I cried, almost reaching out to catch his arm, but suddenly afraid of physical contact with him.

Pausing, he gazed at me with eyes as empty as the priest said they had been when he returned.

"How is this — this fable supposed to make me suffer?" I demanded.

"Why! Because for the rest of your life, you will never be quite sure whether or not to believe me. But I have, after all, been dead."

He picked up the pails and trudged away.

That was thirty-four years ago, when I was young. Ever since, I have devoted myself to the study of folklore and the exegesis of the Bible. A thousand times, a hundred thousand, I have read about resurrection, most frequently — of course — the tale of Jesus and Lazarus. Nowhere have I found comfort. It has all turned out as the dead man predicted.

Now in my seventy-third year, I know I cannot for much longer postpone my encounter with the truth. In failing health, I must decide. He said he could speak only for those who die by violence. I have purchased a bottle of poison. Its effect is said to be gentle, and fatal only in deep sleep. If truly we are fixed in the final instant of life, whereafter nothing changes save for thought, I wish not even to be thinking at the last.

I shall blot this page and set this memoir where it will be found. A tumbler stands ready next to the bottle. I have a fire, for it is cold tonight. The flames flicker on the shiny surface of the glass and make me think of Hell.

Is it not, in the last analysis, unspeakably and immeasurably cruel that our Creator should have permitted His creation awareness of inevitable death?

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Ian Watson's most recent sf novel is The Flies of Memory, *which Carrol and Graf brought out last year. He spent a number of months working on story development with Stanley Kubrick in 1991 ("acting as dream interpreter & soothsayer," Ian writes), and "Looking Down on You" was the first short story he produced after that experience. The story's genesis came from an SF convention in Dusseldorf at which Ian and Terry Pratchett were guests of honor. The convention included a trip to the Rhine Tower for both guests. "Terry had certain reservations about our elevation above terra firma," Ian writes, "and I felt perversely moved to, um, show off a little . . ."*

Looking Down on You

By Ian Watson

And then the glass panel, which Andrew Craig had been lying sprawled upon, gave way. . . .

"THEY *HAVE* TO BE perfectly safe."

That's what Trevor Pears said, nodding at these sloping windows, a self-teasing frisson of dread in his voice.

"They must test the glass," Andrew agreed, exhibiting similar queasy relish.

The two Britons spoke softly, yet one of their German hosts — portly Hans-Peter — immediately related how local schoolboys, who came up the tower on trips with their teachers, would generally throw themselves spread-eagled upon the slanting plates of glass out of bravado. Hanging there. Staring down. A hundred and eighty meters down. Six hundred feet. Suspended by a centimeter of tough glass over an abyss.

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To Andrew, the distance to the ground below seemed more like six thousand feet. Ant people pursued their own short shadows. Cars were tiny toys.

Hans-Peter grinned and slapped his T-shirt-clad girth. "I think I'm too heavy to lie on the glass." The icon on their host's black T-shirt was of comedian and tragedian masks in white outline side by side. Happy tit, sad tit.

Whereas neither Andrew nor Trevor were any burlier than your average adolescent. Indeed, Trevor — whose new noir comedy about an inept Oriental serial murderer, *The Sirens of the Rams*, had just opened to acclaim in London's West End — looked somewhat like a retired jockey who dressed nostalgically. Balding but trim, almost sparrowlike, he favored pastel silk shirts — today's was a soft lime green. Andrew dressed more brutally in jeans and lumberjack shirt. He, too, was short, if somewhat squat. Beneath his defiantly curly russet hair, Andrew's face was mischievous in animation — though melancholy and fatigued in repose.

There hadn't been the remotest hint of a challenge in Hans-Peter's remark, which was joviality itself. His words even stressed that some human burdens might be too extreme for the glass to bear.

"I suppose," mused Trevor, "they would need to calculate for at least fifty or sixty stones' impact just to be on the safe side. . . ."

"Stones?" queried Hans-Peter.

"Weight," explained Andrew thoughtlessly.

"Oh, I am not so heavy." Hans-Peter turned away, seeming hurt; and Andrew felt ashamed.

Indeed, there were several good pretexts for shame.

Such as . . . the gleaming neatness and order and salubrious greenness of this city, with so many trees and parks and geranium-hung balconies; such a dearth of mess, at least in the parts they had seen. Precious little of Düsseldorf was old — for the simple reason that bombs dropped by Andrew's or Trevor's kin of the previous generation had flattened the burg quite thoroughly, clearing the ground for a kind of utopian habitat founded on energetic work and the wealth that that produced. The shame was for the messier, lazier life-style back home. And for the atrophy of his own career.

The personal inevitably found its public mirror wherever it could. . . .

An express elevator, operated by a dapper Turk dressed in a dark suit,

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had whispered their party up smoothly to the observation deck of the Rhine Tower.

From immediately below, that concrete column had soared upward, tapering, to spread into a cone that hid the uppermost microwave dishes, and the slimmer sky-needle from view. The tower was a creamy-white fungus with flat gills of greenish glass. The glass leaned far outward high overhead at an angle of . . . what? Thirty? Thirty-five degrees?

Now they were admiring the view through those great slopes of glass that canted outward so disconcertingly from the very floor.

Sun shone blindingly from a cloudless sky. Only the horizon was hazed by heat, obscuring Cologne twenty-odd miles away. Otherwise . . . miles of clean city, parks, snaking highways, then agriculture, and some distant clusters of pale, satanic mills — coal mines or cooling towers — which hardly polluted the perspective, though their silhouettes were subtly ominous.

Trevor whistled a jaunty theme from Wagner's *Ring*. For the broad Rhine curved around below, with a quiescent amusement park erected on a strip of floodplain, roller-coaster tracks weaving bright hoops and slaloms in the air.

"Ah, we are too far north for Rhine Maidens," observed Hans-Peter.

Indeed. None were visible. Barges plying the river were carrying desert-camouflaged trucks back to base from the recent Gulf War.

Contemplatively, several Japanese were pointing the latest video cameras at the expensive leafy suburb over the water beyond the nearest of the suspension bridges. Kneeling, one murmured a commentary, laying down a sound track. Perhaps they were filming their own expensive houses, since Düsseldorf was home to sixty thousand Japanese businessmen and families.

The commentator tilted his camera down to capture the North Rhine—Westphalia Parliament Buiding, reminiscent of a gleaming machine made of large gear wheels and springs — a hand could almost reach down and wind it up, to set it in sleek motion.

Reach *down*.

And down.

"What a shame," Trevor said to Hans-Peter. "I was hoping to see a Rhine Maiden break surface." Hans-Peter grinned and shrugged at this seeming whim, which was geographically inaccurate.

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Surfaces do break . . ., thought Andrew.

But not those glass panels, oh no.

"You should be nearer Koblenz for Rhine Maidens," said their host.

When Andrew had barely left school, decades ago, he had hitchhiked through that most picturesque part of the Rhineland all on his own, staying in youth hostels, en route from Holland to Austria. He would always remember one lift with an impeccably tailored man driving a Mercedes. Inevitably, adolescent Andrew — dressed in some army surplus jacket — had been somewhat scruffy. Cruising through Boppard or another of those enchanting little towns, their Merce had overhauled a crippled hunchback who was gimping slowly along the pavement. The driver had slowed to a crawl and coasted past, laughing heartily at the cripple. Andrew felt that he himself was being laughed at, too . . . .

How shabby he felt, up this tower. And how scruffy much of his own country was — bottom of the Euro economic league fourth year running. Rising unemployment, businesses collapsing, houses being repossessed, cardboard cities for the homeless, suicides, the slow death of the Health Services, the cramping of the schools. Just a month earlier, only streets away from Andrew's flat, a fellow had died in his car parked in the driveway of his former home, which was no longer his. His computer business had failed. Food was in the car trunk. The gas tank was empty. The man supposedly had died . . . of "natural causes." Was that code for sheer despair?

How shabby Andrew's own life had become since his work dried up three years earlier, and since the divorce, which he didn't wish to think about.

YET HERE in Düsseldorf, obliviously, he was being feted — along with Trevor, and the Americans Gail Gardner and Jerry de Rosa. Andrew was enjoying a brief postmortem existence — so it seemed to him. The foreign hand of welcome caressed generously, if sometimes reproachfully, as when he failed to comport himself as a good European.

The Düsseldorf Drama Festival was staging the German premiere of his black farce *Cold Calls*, an absurdist treatment of economic agony featuring a double-glazing salesman and his family. Their desperate dialing of random telephone numbers to solicit orders involved them crazily in a terrorist conspiracy.

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In truth, the play had begun as a heartfelt statement; yet it had rapidly become eccentric, paranoid, and zany. A tour de force of the fringe, a masterpiece of the margin.

Cold Calls had been Andrew's final play. Thereafter dialogue had died. With Dorothy; with Jonathon, their teenage son. With audiences, and with himself — though the part-time lecturing tided him through, and though news of his demise hadn't yet registered in Düsseldorf.

Gail Gardner wrote musical comedies for Broadway, and Jerry de Rosa operated more seriously Off-Broadway. It was white-haired, perky, capricious Gail who had advised Andrew, *"Don't look down at yourself, kiddo. Respect yourself."* This was after hearing him interviewed by the German press, in a self-deprecating vein that Andrew had imagined witty at the time. Gail had fixed him with a stern stare, which she softened by patting him on the arm.

Of course, in the real world, dialogue continued, and his ear registered it, though all seemed unusable.

"Over there" — Hans-Peter was gesturing at the rich suburb — "is where the assassination took place just a while ago. Of the minister for the new lands. The eastern lands. He had his home there."

Of a sudden, terrorism was close at hand, and real, and serious. Andrew wondered how he could possibly have *presumed* to write about terrorism and double glazing.

Each of the four guests had their own dutiful German escort, and now Andrew's own — slim, bespectacled Joachim — returned to join him and Trevor and Hans-Peter. The two other escorts — an ebullient dark-haired woman and an older, weatherbeaten man whose names Andrew had already misplaced in his increasingly fraying memory — were farther around the tower, pointing out sights to Gail and Jerry. Gail was traveling around Europe with an autocratic, blue-rinsed companion lady, and Jerry with a handsome, affected young male secretary — supposedly a secretary.

"Would you like some coffee and chocolate cake?" asked Joachim. "I think the others will sit down for a while."

A child was squalling in the café area, and Andrew shook his head. Trevor nodded a vague acceptance of the invitation, though he didn't yet make a move. He was still staring at the suburb where the blood had been shed.

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"I suppose," Trevor quipped to Hans-Peter, "if you buy a whole new country, some people in it might get a trifle *irritated.*"

And Hans-Peter laughed, for Trevor was a witty noir dramatist.

"Buy a country! Oh yes, we're buying East Germany — but meanwhile, you see, the Japanese are busy buying us!"

"It will cost," said Joachim earnestly. "But we will pay."

Trevor smiled mischievously. "Jerry said I really must visit the East before you lot change it totally. He told me that going there's like driving along in a Technicolor movie — and suddenly it all changes to black and white."

"How do you suppose they wash the *outsides* of these windows?" Andrew resumed; and Trevor flinched in mock dismay.

How *could* a cleaning cradle possibly be lowered down the outside of that slope?

"I think," said Andrew, "the cleaners wear suction pads on their palms and their knees, and they *crawl* down from above . . . ." He mimed a jerky, splayed progress across the overhanging glass.

He leaned forward, hands resting on the steel spars to right and left. Along the river frontage, construction work was in progress, which would presently roof over the roadway to create a garden esplanade. On what was currently a neck of wasteland, many colorful tents were pitched close together behind a wire fence. *Zigeuners.* Gypsies. Almost invisible from this height, placards strung along the wire demanded their right to remain in Germany. When the party had passed by earlier, naked brown-skinned children with greasy black hair had been playing in dust around campfires. Where did they come from? Romania? Perhaps! What language did they speak? "Some ethnic dialect," Joachim had supposed.

Andrew's hands flexed on the steel spars.

"Go on," coaxed Trevor. "You want to." His tone said otherwise — he didn't even wish to *see* anyone emulate the exploits of those German schoolboys. He didn't believe Andrew would.

So Andrew lowered himself face-first onto the glass panel. Spreading himself — oh yes, in a Saint Andrew's cross, and holding on to nothing —he stared down at the sunbaked ground far below. Nothing but glass and air between himself and concrete.

Only after he had thrust himself back onto his feet did he allow himself to imagine the glass popping out under his weight. And the fall, the

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fall. *Then* his stomach fluttered, and his knees went wobbly. Though not very.

"I don't in the least mind looking down from an *airplane*," said Trevor. "That doesn't mean anything. But if I'm in somewhere that's *attached* to the ground —"

"I wonder if one could *fly* —"

Trevor immediately understood. "— fly down, and land in the river? It's a bit *far*. I suppose if you *knew* what you were doing, and had the right clothes on. . . . After all, James Bond did it in that movie."

Andrew thought of thermal updrafts from the baking concrete below, of capricious winds swirling around the tower, of a great sheet of glass acting as a sail. He thought of falling like a stone. Falling for quite a few seconds. Then smashing into black oblivion.

"So what would your last words be — in your mind?" Trevor asked.

"Trying to steal my dialogue, eh?"

"I'm just curious."

"I was thinking that, 'Oh fuck,' would probably sum it up."

"Not, 'Father-forgive-me-receive-me-I-believe-in-you-utterly'?"

Andrew shook his head.

The Siemens Building and its neighbors were silver cigarette packets, foil-clad by reflected sunlight.

"Isn't this something?" called Gail as Andrew and Trevor hove in view.

Some muscular, tanned locals were drinking beer at a neighboring table. Tipsily, they began to query the dark-haired woman — oh yes, she was Gisela — as to why the dramatists' companions were speaking in English, even to each other. That was wrong. Visitors should speak German. Andrew understood only that much of what they said; and paused uncomfortably, while Gisela talked to the men, merrily.

Turned out they were miners. Despite past guarantees of a hundred years' employment, their mines were now under threat of closure. Cheaper coal from the east was to blame. . . .

One miner staggered erect, rambling loquaciously, and mimed throwing himself from the tower; though he didn't seem woeful unto suicide, only peeved.

"He says, in Berlin, in the Potsdamerplatz . . . you know?" explained Joachim. "Beside a stretch of the Wall that still remains, you can jump off a crane fifty meters high —"

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"The Death Jump!" exclaimed Jerry. "Paul and I saw that. *Crazy.*"

"Ja, der Todessprung," agreed the miner.

"Those who jump, wear a harness, with some sort of cable attached —how do you say it?" Joachim concertinaed his hands in and out.

"Elastic."

"Yes, elastic. It costs one hundred marks, for five seconds of fear. What a waste of money! He wishes someone would pay him a hundred marks twice a day to jump off a crane instead of working at a coal face they will close. He is quite gentle, really," Joachim murmured as the miner flapped his arms. "He's a big softy. Don't worry."

Andrew wandered on around the observation deck on his own.

He found himself alone, out of sight of a soul. By some flux of crowd dynamics, all visitors to the deck except for himself — Japanese, German families, whoever — had flowed to the other side of the circuit around the central column that housed the elevators. Maxwell's demon might suddenly have presided over all of the persons who had hitherto seemed distributed randomly.

All except Andrew, whom the demon had isolated.

Here was the very same plate of glass that he had rested upon, prostrate, just a few minutes before. Surely the same one. The *tested* one. Tested by himself. Down there was the windup Parliament Building. At the same angle as earlier, the tented camp of the *Zigeuners.*

Trevor was right about the sheer paucity of his interior dialogue. "Fuck" wasn't adequate at all. Surely something more profound? Something wittier? More insightful? Something that capsuled a whole life. And life itself. Something that . . . hovered just beyond his grasp.

If only he could lay his hand upon that elusive something, why, *true dialogue* might commence for him once more.

Andrew leaned forward, surrendering his weight once again to the glass.

And the glass panel gave way. . . .

Andrew had bothered to read a bit about glass before he wrote *Cold Calls.* He might work some nugget of offbeat knowledge into the play.

Glass was a supercooled liquid. It cooled without crystallizing. Its molecules didn't arrange themselves into a regular, repetitive pattern, but remained all jumbled up as in a fluid. Glass possessed no internal bound-

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aries that would scatter light. Thus, you could see clearly through glass.

Over thousands of years, glass might perhaps *creep* just a little.

THE GLASS panel flowed.

Andrew flowed, too.

With a terrible lurch of the heart, with his limbs becoming soft rubber, he *knew* that the glass had given way beneath him; that it was falling out of the tower, and that he, too, was falling out with it, helplessly, inevitably. For he sank.

But then he sank no farther.

He was suspended, at the very same angle as the glass had been, staring across the Rhine.

His body had gone away, had melted; and he *was* the glass panel itself. The glass had gathered him into it — and it was he who hung fixed there between those steel spars, hanging terrifyingly over empty air.

A barge moved upstream, cutting a wake. Cars sped. Ant people followed their shadows. And upon all this, he looked down.

Presently he heard Trevor's clipped accent. "Well, if you're sure he isn't in the toilet, then he isn't anywhere up here."

"The toilets are definitely empty."

"Those elevator operators say they didn't take him down." That was Joachim.

"Maybe they didn't notice him. Maybe there was a crush."

"They are sure of it."

"So he must have used the emergency stairs," suggested Jerry de Rosa. "The fire exit."

"*Why*! Without telling anyone?"

"We've been all the way round by now in both directions," said Trevor.

"How very inconsiderate of Mr. Craig," remarked Gail's companion.

None of them could see Andrew in the glass — even faintly, even as a ghostly reflection — and he couldn't turn, for now he was the glass. No more could he cry out to them, for he was mute.

Their hosts talked to each other rapidly in German.

Joachim sighed. "I will go down the stairs after him."

"Poor you," Gail sympathized.

"We will meet at the bottom. We must move on, or we shall miss seeing sufficient of our luxurious Kö."

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"Quite," agreed Gail's friend. "We have some shopping we want to do on the Kōnigsallee."

And all this, he heard from behind him.

He thought that Joachim returned about twenty minutes later. That seemed to be his voice, asking anxious, breathless questions in German —to no avail.

The afternoon wore on, blindingly bright. The Rhine flowed by, quite like dark blue glass itself, rippled by the wind.

Aslant, he stared out — and down — as though he were some perfectly flat and invisible gargoyle affixed to the tower.

The horror of falling — of being released suddenly from his suspension — became irrelevant. He almost wished he could fall free. For then something would happen.

It was a long evening until night, until the myriad lights of the city glowed white and golden for miles.

What would his hosts think had happened? Amnesia? A nervous breakdown? An assault of utter rudeness?

Had he taken a train eastward on impulse to the monochrome land? To the land without precise law, where the policemen no longer had any clear idea what their own rights and duties were. The ambiguous land, the indigent land, where dialogue was being awkwardly reborn. Dialogue between people; dialogue with the rest of the German nation — which might become a disillusioned, embittered dialogue. A family dialogue of the deaf. As witness that bloodshed among the smart dwellings across the river.

Had he gone, like some sleepwalker, to where language had till so recently been censored, so as to study the revival of speech?

Mutely, poised motionless, imprinted in glass, he who had looked down on himself now looked down on a whole city.

Andrew became aware of movement just above his window. At first, this seemed to be but a coiling, a congealing of the air.

Then a long-limbed shape moved down, clinging to him. The shape blurred before his eyes as he sought to focus on something so close.

He must not shrink from it! Otherwise, his glass might suddenly con-

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tract — more than it ever contracted during the coldest winter night. Then it might pop free. It would spin down and shatter six hundred feet below, fracturing him schizophrenically into a dozen or a hundred parts of himself, most to be swept up and discarded, one little piece perhaps to be worn as a charm by a scavenging, dusky *Zigeuner* who discerned in that shard a segment of an imprisoned soul. . . .

He must not shrink.

The being that had come from above moved slowly over his surface. Its slim, flexible limbs were translucent. As was its torso. Through its body, with almost the same perfect clarity as before, Andrew saw the dark Rhine, the bridge, and the well-lit suburb — subject to a trembling ripple, to stray bendings of the light. No one watching from below through powerful binoculars would notice anything odd.

Its head came in view, peering at him from only inches away.

A head of glass, of clear jelly. Bumps were its eyes. Its nose and its mouth were one and the same: a tapering proboscis.

The being resembled a pellucid suit, a body-sleeve, awaiting a wearer. Feeling its way as if blind, it moved slowly, seeking a resident.

Its proboscis kissed the outer surface of the window, seeking Andrew's trapped, arrested existence.

The proboscis began to suck.

He was climbing, splayhanded and splayfooted, across the sloping upper tier of windows, in an invisible body.

His was not the impulse to climb. He sensed inevitability in the motions of this ethereal body of his. If he resisted — *could* he resist? — perhaps the body would flutter away in the wind.

He clambered sinuously over the lip onto the broad rim occupied by great microwave dishes and horns — the true purpose of this tower, after all. Stepping behind one horn, he clung to it, a jellyfish embracing a vast ear trumpet.

As his fingers played slowly across the rear surface, a torrent of voices flooded through him: in German, English, Japanese . . . a thousand telephone conversations. The dialogue of the world, restored multifold. Intimacies, conspiracies, bargainings. Electronic music warbled, too. Much would be from radar sites scrupulously scrying eastward. Fax transmissions; bursts of compressed, encrypted data. . . . It was the voices he really listened to.

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And of course he understood those that were in English.

Shimmying to another horn, he wrapped himself upon it.

The glassy being hadn't understood any of the voices until now.

But now it did.

"Where are you from!" he asked himself — silently, for the only sound was of the wind. *"What are you!"*

And though there was no acknowledgment of his question, he seemed to feel himself call out from behind the horn, *"Where are you! Where are you!"*

Straining for an answer, he held the horn, sieving through all the whispering bombardment of polyglot voices for a special voice that might speak in a lilting, crooning language unheard hitherto in the world. A voice issuing from some other tower that might well be in another country, a voice that might even be in orbit high overhead, circling the Earth on a satellite where another similar glassy being clung.

These potent yet precarious beings: were they of the Earth? Were they alternative entities, angels, that were virtually invisible?

Were they aliens from another star?

What had gone askew with their schemes, if indeed anything had gone askew at all?

He waited a year — through autumn, through winter, through spring. He haunted the heights of the tower in rain, in snow, in sun, embracing the horns so as to eavesdrop on a million voices, and on the burble of electronic code.

Perhaps his body and that other lost body, marooned on some distant tower, were separated lovers. Perhaps they were scouts who had lost contact — having fallen from Heaven or from space — and who were learning what they could of the world in what to them might seem like the span of a mere day.

For a year, he looked down on the city and the tiny people coming and going below. He crooned silently as though the horns would amplify his cryptic and elusive message, beaming it across the Earth.

Until time brought round a hot summer again, and he knew, he *knew* — as though he were smelling a compelling aroma — that he must climb over the lip of the tower and crawl down the slanting windows on a certain afternoon. During daylight, yes.

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His strange body heeded this yearning. He lay flat. First one sinuous arm, then the other, crept over the edge.

The drama festival had come round yet again; and Trevor had returned to Düsseldorf, and of course to the Rhine Tower.

As Andrew clung outside the glass, Trevor was loitering within with Hans-Peter.

Otherwise, the guests were new. Trevor recognized a bearded Afro-Caribbean playwright; Joachim was attending to the man. Gisela was occupied with an intense-looking redheaded woman who wore a denim suit and a red rose through a buttonhole.

Andrew mewed at his countryman.

"Trev—or! Trev—or —!"

Trevor rubbed his eyes because his vision was blurring as he gazed through alien or angelic Andrew at the Rhine. Smiling ruefully, Trevor stretched out his palm toward the sloping glass.

He wasn't intending to lean his whole weight against the glass. Oh no. But he did press his palm up against the window, and thrust tentatively.

It was as if a circuit had closed.

Not the circuit that Andrew had imagined the being was trying to establish by microwave with another of its kind — but a circuit of self-identity, of completion.

Clinging to the glassy overhang, the invisible being relaxed.

When the party left the tower, there was some commotion down below. Spectators were gathering, including a couple of dusky, oily-haired Gypsies. A tall, golden-legged woman in shorts and white jogging shoes was puffing on a cigarette as she talked urgently to a young policeman, who fingered the radio clipped to his belt.

On the concrete lay a heap of opaque milky jelly.

"She is saying it fell in front of her, from out of the air," explained Hans-Peter. "He thinks the *Zigeuners* may have dumped something nasty there by way of a protest."

"What is it?" butted in the denimed redhead.

Already the jelly was beginning to sag and melt in the fierce sunlight.

"It's almost like limbs. Like a body," hazarded Trevor.

"No, that isn't the right shape for a body," insisted Joachim.

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"A body woven of liquid. . . ." Trevor sneezed convulsively several times. "Maybe it crawled out of the river. . . ." His words seemed as capricious as his sudden nasal volley.

Hans-Peter grinned. "Ah! Maybe it is a *Rhine Maiden* in decay! You see, Trevor: I remember what you said last year."

"If that's a Rhine Maiden," remarked the black playwright, "save me from their embrace." Stroking his beard, he eyed Gisela speculatively, but she merely said, "It is awful."

The jelly continued slumping and flowing. Escaping fluid was already evaporating in the intense heat, steaming into the air. Soon there would be no evidence left.

Realizing this, the tanned jogger became more insistent. Frowning, the policeman reasoned with the woman, then he glared at the Gypsies, who returned his gaze expressionlessly.

"He thinks she has sunstroke," said Hans-Peter. "He wants to call an ambulance for her. Now *we* must hurry up, or we will not have enough time to visit the Kŏnigsallee."

Trevor stared up the mushroom stalk of the tower at the windows that leaned out.

"A year," he murmured. "A whole year."

And he shivered in the sunlight.

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Charles de Lint's story, "Bridges," also uses architecture to provide a unique perspective on our world. "Bridges" inspired the stunning cover on this issue. TOR just published Charles' novel, The Little Country, *in paperback. It follows his sequel (of sorts) to* Moonheart, Spirit Walk, *which TOR published in May.*

Bridges

By Charles de Lint

SHE WATCHED THE taillights dwindle until, far down the dirt road, the car went around a curve. The two red dots winked out, and then she was alone.

Stones crunched underfoot as she shifted from one foot to another, looking around herself. Trees, mostly cedar and pine, crowded the road's narrow shoulder on either side. Above her the sky held too many stars, but for all their number, they shed too little light. She was used to city streets and pavement, to neon and streetlights. Even in the 'burbs, there was always some man-made light.

The darkness and silence, the loneliness of the night as it crouched in the trees, spooked her. It chipped at the veneer of her street-smart toughness. She was twenty miles out of the city, up in the hills that backed onto the Kickaha

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Reserve. Attitude counted for nothing out here.

She didn't bother cursing Eddie. She conserved her breath for the long walk back to the city, just hoping she wouldn't run into some pickup truck full of redneck hillbillies who might not be quite as ready to just cut her loose as Eddie had when he realized he wasn't going to get his way. For too many men, no meant yes. And she'd heard stories about some of the good old boys who lived in these hills.

She didn't even hate Eddie, for all that he was eminently hateful. She saved that hatred for herself, for being so trusting when she knew — when she *knew* — how it always turned out.

"Stupid bloody cow," she muttered as she began to walk.

High school was where it had started.

She'd liked to party; she'd liked to have a good time; she hadn't seen anything wrong with making out, because it was fun. Once you got a guy to slow down, sex was the best thing around.

She went with a lot of guys, but it took her a long time to realize just how many, and that they wanted only one thing from her. She was slow on the uptake, because she hadn't seen a problem until that night with Dave. Before that, she'd just seen herself as popular. She always had a date; someone was always ready to take her out and have some fun. The guy she'd gone out with on the weekend might ignore her the next Monday at school, but there was always someone else there, leaning up against her locker, asking her what she was doing tonight, so that she never really had time to think it through.

Never *wanted* to think it through, she'd realized in retrospect.

Until Dave wanted her to go to the drive-in that Saturday night.

"I'd rather go to the dance," she told him.

It was just a disco with a D.J., but she was in the mood for loud music and stepping out, not a movie. First Dave tried to convince her to go to the drive-in, then he said that if she wanted to go dancing he knew some good clubs. She didn't know where the flash of insight had come from — it just flared there inside her head, leaving a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, a tightness in her chest.

"You don't want to be seen with me at the dance," she said.

"It's not that. It's just . . . well, all the guys. . . ."

"Told you what? That I'm a cheap lay?"

"No, it's just, well. . . ."

The knowing looks she got in the hall, the way guys would talk to her be-

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fore they went out, but avoided her later — it all came together.

Jesus, how could she have been so stupid?

She got out of his car, which was still parked in front of her dad's house. Tears were burning the back of her eyes, but she refused to let them come. She never talked to Dave again. She swore that things were going to change.

It didn't matter that she didn't go out with another guy for her whole senior year; everyone still thought of her as the school tramp. Two months ago, she'd finally finished school. She didn't even wait to get her grades. With money she'd saved up through the year, she moved from her dad's place in the 'burbs to her own apartment in Lower Crowsea, got a job as a receptionist in an office on Yoors Street, and was determined that things were going to be different. She had no history where she lived or where she worked; no one to snigger at her when she went down a hall.

It was a new start, and it wasn't easy. She didn't have any friends, but then, she hadn't really had any before, either — she just hadn't had the time or good sense to realize that. But she was working on it now. She'd gotten to know Sandra, who lived down the hall in her building, and they'd hung out together, watching videos or going to one of the bars in the Market — girls' night out, men need not apply.

She liked having a girl for a friend. She hadn't had one since she lost her virginity, just a few days before her fifteenth birthday, and discovered that boys could make her feel really good in ways that a girl couldn't.

Besides Sandra, she was starting to get to know the people at work, too —which was where she met Eddie. He was the building's mail clerk, dropping off a bundle of mail on her desk every morning, hanging out for a couple of minutes, finally getting the courage up to ask her for a date. Her first one in a very long time.

He seemed like a nice guy, so she said yes. A friend of his was having a party at his cottage, not far from town. There'd be a bonfire on the beach, some people would be bringing their guitars, and they'd sing old Buddy Holly and Beatles tunes. They'd barbecue hamburgers and hot dogs. It'd be fun.

Fifteen minutes ago, Eddie had pulled the car over to the side of the road. Killing the engine, he leaned back against the driver's door, gaze lingering on how her T-shirt molded to her chest. He gave her a goofy grin.

"Why are we stopping?" she'd asked, knowing it sounded dumb, knowing what was coming next.

"I was thinking," Eddie said. "We could have our own private party."

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"No, thanks."

"Come on. Chuck said —"

"Chuck? Chuck who?"

"Anderson. He used to go to Mawson High with you."

A ghost from the past, rising to haunt her. She knew Chuck Anderson.

"He just moved into my building. We were talking, and when I mentioned your name, he told me all about you. He said you liked to party."

"Well, he's full of shit. I think you'd better take me home."

"You don't have to play hard-to-get," Eddie said.

He started to reach for her, but her hand was quicker. It went into her purse and came out with a switchblade. She touched the release button, and its blade came out of the handle with a wicked-sounding *snick*. Eddie moved back to his own side of the car.

"What the hell are you trying to prove?" he demanded.

"Just take me home."

"Screw you. Either you come across, or you walk."

She gave him a long, hard stare, then nodded. "Then I walk."

The car's wheels spat gravel as soon as she was out, engine gunning as Eddie maneuvered a tight 180. She closed up her knife and dropped it back into her purse as she watched the taillights recede.

HER LEGS were aching by the time she reached the covered bridge that crossed Stickers Creek just before it ran into the Kickaha River. She'd walked about three miles since Eddie had dumped her; only another seventeen to go.

Twice she'd hidden in the trees as a vehicle passed her. The first one had looked so innocent that she berated herself for not trying to thumb a ride. The second was a pickup with a couple of yahoos in it. One of them had tossed out a beer bottle that just missed hitting her — he hadn't known she was hiding in the cedars there, and she was happy that it had stayed that way. Thankfully, she had let nervous caution overrule the desire to just get the hell out of here and home.

She sat down on this side of the bridge to rest. She couldn't see much of the quick-moving creek below her — just white tops that flashed in the starlight — but she could hear it. It was a soothing sound.

She thought about Eddie.

She should have been able to see it in him, shouldn't she? It wasn't as

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though she didn't know what to be looking for.

And Chuck Anderson. Jesus.

What was the point in trying to make a new start when nobody gave you a break?

She sighed and rose to her feet. There was no sense in railing against it. The world wasn't fair, and that was that. But God, it was lonely. How could you carry on, always by yourself? What was the *point?*

Her footsteps had a hollow ring as she walked across the covered bridge, and she started to get spooked again. What if a car came, right *now?* There was nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide. Just the dusty insides of the covered bridge, its wood so old she was surprised it was still standing.

Halfway across, she felt an odd dropping sensation in her stomach, like being in an elevator that was going down too quickly. Vertigo had her leaning against the wooden planks that sided the bridge. She knew a moment's panic — oh Jesus, she was falling — but then the feeling went away, and she could walk to the far end of the bridge without feeling dizzy.

She stepped outside — and stopped dead in her tracks. Her earlier panic was mild in comparison to what she felt now as she stared ahead in disbelief.

Everything familiar was gone. Road, trees, hills — all gone. She wasn't in the same country anymore — wasn't in the country at all. A city like something out of an Escher painting lay spread out in front of her. Odd buildings, angles all awry, leaned against and pushed away from each other, all at the same time. Halfway up their lengths, there seemed to be a kind of vortical shift so that the top halves appeared to be reflections of the lower.

And then there were the bridges.

Everywhere she looked, there were bridges. Bridges connecting the buildings, bridges connecting bridges, bridges that went nowhere, bridges that folded back on themselves so that you couldn't tell where they started or ended. Too many bridges to count.

She started to back up the way she'd come, but got no farther than two steps, when a hand reached out of the shadows and pulled her forward. She flailed against her attacker, who swung her about and then held her with her arms pinned against her body.

"Easy, easy," a male voice said in her ear.

It had a dry, dusty sound to it, like the kind you could imagine old books in a library's stacks have when they talk to each other late at night.

"Let me go, let me *GO!*" she cried.

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Still holding her, her assailant walked her to the mouth of the covered bridge.

"Look," he said.

For a moment she was still too panicked to know what he was talking about. But then it registered. The bridge she'd walked across to get to this nightmare city no longer had a roadway. There was just empty space between its wooden walls now. If her captor hadn't grabbed her when he did, she would have fallen God knew how far.

She stopped struggling, and he let her go. She moved gingerly away from the mouth of the covered bridge, then stopped again, not knowing where to go, what to do. Everywhere she looked, there were weird tilting buildings and bridges.

It was impossible. None of this was happening, she decided. She'd fallen asleep on the other side of the bridge, and was just dreaming all of this.

"Will you be all right?" her benefactor asked.

"I . . . I. . . ."

She turned to look at him. The moonlight made him out to be a harmless-looking guy. He was dressed in faded jeans and an off-white flannel shirt, cowboy boots and a jean jacket. His hair was dark and short. It was hard to make out his features, except for his eyes. They seemed to take in the moonlight and then send it back out again, twice as bright.

Something about him calmed her — until she tried to speak.

"Whoareyou?" she asked. "WhatisthisplacehowdidIgethere?"

As soon as the first question came out, a hundred others came clamoring into her mind, each demanding to be voiced, to be answered. She shut her mouth after the first few burst out in a breathless spurt, realizing that they would just feed the panic that she was only barely keeping in check.

She took a deep breath, then tried again.

"Thank you," she said. "For saving me."

"You're welcome."

Again that dry, dusty voice. But the air itself was dry, she realized. She could almost feel the moisture leaving her skin.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You can call me Jack."

"My name's Moira — Moira Jones."

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Jack inclined his head in a slight nod. "Are you all right now, Moira Jones?" he asked.

"I think so."

"Good, well —"

"Wait!" she cried, realizing that he was about to leave her. "What is this place? Why did you bring me here?"

He shook his head. "I didn't," he said. "No one comes to the City of Bridges unless it's their fate to do so. In that sense, you brought yourself."

"But . . . ?"

"I know. It's all strange and different. You don't know where to turn, whom to trust."

There was the faintest hint of mockery under the dry tones of his voice.

"Something like that," Moira said.

He seemed to consider her for the longest time.

"I don't know you," he said finally. "I don't know why you brought yourself here or where you come from. I don't know how, or even if, you'll ever find your way home again."

Bizarre though her situation was, oddly enough, Moira found herself adjusting to it far more quickly than she would have thought possible. It was almost like being in a dream where you just accept things as they come along, except she knew this wasn't a dream — just as she knew that she was getting the brush-off.

"Listen," she said. "I appreciate your help a moment ago, but don't worry about me. I'll get by."

"What I do know, however," Jack went on as though she hadn't spoken, "is that this is a place for those who have no other place to go."

"What're you saying? That it's some kind of a dead-end place?"

The way her life was going, it sounded like it had been made for her.

"It's a forgotten place."

"Forgotten by whom?"

"By the world in which it exists," Jack said.

"How can a place this weird be forgotten?" she asked.

Moira looked around at the bridges as she spoke. They were everywhere, of every size and shape and persuasion. One that looked like it belonged in a Japanese tea garden stood side by side with part of what had to be an interstate overpass, but somehow the latter didn't overshadow the

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former, although both their proportions were precise. She saw rope bridges, wooden bridges, and old stone bridges like the Kelly Street Bridge that crossed the Kickaha River in that part of Newford called the Rosses.

She wondered if she'd ever see Newford again.

"The same way people forget their dreams," Jack replied. He touched her elbow, withdrawing his hand before she could take offense. "Come walk with me if you like. I've a previous appointment, but I can show you around a bit on the way."

Moira hesitated for a long moment, then fell into step beside him. They crossed a metal bridge, the heels of their boots ringing. Of course, she thought, they couldn't go anywhere without crossing a bridge. Bridges were the only kind of roads that existed in this place.

"Do you live here?" she asked.

Jack shook his head. "But I'm here a lot. I deal in possibilities, and that's what bridges are in a way — not so much the ones that already exist to take you from one side of something to another, but the kind we build for ourselves."

"What are you talking about?"

"Say you want to be an artist — a painter, perhaps. The bridge you build between when you don't know which end of the brush to hold to when you're doing respected work can include studying under another artist, experimenting on your own, whatever. You build the bridge, and it either takes you where you want it to, or it doesn't."

"And if it doesn't?"

His teeth flashed in the moonlight. "Then you build another one, and maybe another one, until one of them does."

Moira nodded as though she understood, all the while asking herself, What am I *doing* here?

"But this," he added, "is a place of failed dreams. Where bridges that go nowhere find their end."

Wonderful, Moira thought. A forgotten place. A dead end.

They started across an ornate bridge. Its upper chords were all filigreed metal; its roadway, cobblestone. Two-thirds of the way across, what she took to be a pile of rags shifted and sat up. It was a beggar with a tattered cloak wrapped around him or her — Moira couldn't tell the sex of the poor creature. It seemed to press closer against the railing as they came abreast of it.

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"Cancer victim," Jack said as they passed the figure. "Nothing left to live for, so she came here."

Moira shivered. "Can't you — can't we do anything for her?"

"Nothing to be done for her," Jack replied.

The dusty tones of his voice made it impossible for her to decide if that was true, or if he just didn't care.

"But —"

"She wouldn't be here if there were," he said.

Wood underfoot now — a primitive bridge of rough timbers. The way Jack led her was a twisting path that seemed to take them back the way they'd come as much as forward. As they crossed an arched stone walkway, Moira heard a whimper. She paused and saw a child huddled up against a doorway below.

Jack stopped, waiting for her to catch up.

"There's a child," she began.

"You'll have to understand," Jack said, "that there's nothing you can do for anyone here. They've long since given up Hope. They belong to Despair now."

"Surely —"

"It's an abused child," Jack said. He glanced at his wristwatch. "I've time. Go help it."

"God, you're a cold fish."

Jack tapped his watch. "Time's slipping away."

Moira was trapped between just wanting to tell him to shove off and her fear of being stuck in this place by herself. Jack wasn't much, but at least he seemed to know his way around.

"I'll be right back," she said.

She hurried back down the arched path and crossed a rickety wooden bridge to the doorway of the building. The child looked up at her approach, his whimpers muting as he pushed his face against his shoulder.

"There, there," Moira said. "You're going to be O.K."

She moved forward, pausing when the child leaped to his feet, back against the wall. He held his hands out before him, warding her away.

"No one's going to hurt you."

She took another step, and he started to scream.

"Don't cry!" she said, continuing to move forward. "I'm here to help you."

The child bolted before she could reach him. He slipped under her arm

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and was off and away, leaving a wailing cry in his wake. Moira stared after him.

"You'll never catch him now," Jack called down from above.

She looked up at him. He was sitting on the edge of the arched walkway, legs dangling, heels tapping against the stonework.

"I wasn't going to hurt him," she said.

"He doesn't know that. I told you: the people here have long since given up hope. You can't help them — nobody can. They can't even help themselves anymore."

"What are they doing here?"

Jack shrugged. "They've got to go somewhere, don't they?"

Moira made her way back to where he was waiting for her, anger clouding her features.

"Don't you even *care*!" she demanded.

His only reply was to start walking again. She hesitated for a long moment, then hurried to catch up. She walked with her arms wrapped around herself, but the chill she felt came from inside, and it wouldn't go away.

They crossed bridges beyond her ability to count as they made their way into the central part of the city. From time to time, they passed the odd streetlight, its dim glow making a feeble attempt to push back the shadows; in other places the ghosts of flickering neon signs crackled and hissed more than they gave off light. In some ways the lighting made things worse, for it revealed the city's general state of decay — cracked walls, rubbled streets, refuse wherever one turned.

Under one lamppost, she got a better look at her companion. His features were strong rather than handsome; none of the callousness she sensed in his voice was reflected in them. He caught her gaze and gave her a thin smile, but the humor in his eyes was more mocking than companionable.

They continued to pass by dejected and lost figures that hunched in the shadows, huddled against buildings, or bolted at their approach. Jack listed their despairs for her — AIDS victim, rape victim, abused wife, paraplegic — until Moira begged him to stop.

"I can't take anymore," she said.

"I'm sorry. I thought you wanted to know."

They went the rest of the way in silence, the bridges taking them

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higher and higher, until they finally stood on the top of an enormous building that appeared to be the largest and most centrally placed of the city's structures. From its heights the city was spread out around them on all sides.

It made for an eerie sight. Moira stepped back from the edge of the roof, away from the pull of vertigo that came creeping up the small of her back to whisper in her ear. She had only to step out, into the night sky, it told her. Step out, and all her troubles would be forever eased.

At the sound of a footstep, she turned gratefully away from the disturbing view. A woman was walking toward them, pausing when she was a few paces away. Unlike the other inhabitants of the city, she gave the impression of being self-assured, of being in control of her destiny.

She had pale skin and short, spiky red hair, A half dozen silver earrings hung from one ear; the other had a small silver stud in the shape of a star. Like Jack, she was dressed casually: black jeans, black boots, white tank top, a black leather jacket draped over one shoulder. And like Jack, her eyes, too, seemed like a reservoir for the moonlight.

"You're not alone," she said to Jack.

"I never am," Jack replied. "You know that. My sister, Diane," he added to Moira, then introduced her to Diane.

The woman remained silent, studying Moira with her moon-bright eyes until Moira couldn't help but fidget. The dreamlike quality of her situation was beginning to filter away. Once again a panicked feeling was making itself felt in the pit of her stomach.

"Why are you here?" Diane asked her finally.

Her voice had a different quality than her brother's. It was a warm, rounded sound that carried in it a sweet scent like that of cherry blossoms or rosebuds. It took away Moira's panic, returning her once more to that sense of it all just being a dream.

"I . . . I don't know," she said. "I was just crossing a bridge on my way home, and the next thing I knew, I was . . . here. Wherever here is. I — look. I just want to go home. I don't want any of this to be real."

"It's very real," Diane said.

"Wonderful."

"She wants to help the unhappy," Jack offered, "but they just run away from her."

Moira shot him a dirty look.

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"Do be still," Diane told him, frowning as she spoke. She returned her attention to Moira. "Why don't you go home?"

"I — I don't know *how* to. The bridge that brought me here . . . when I went to go back across it, its roadway was gone."

Diane nodded. "What has my brother told you?"

Nothing that made sense, Moira wanted to say, but she related what she remembered of her conversations with Jack.

"And do you despair?" Diane asked.

"I. . . ."

Moira hesitated. She thought of the hopeless, dejected people she'd passed on the way to this rooftop.

"Not really, I guess. I mean, I'm not happy or anything, but. . . ."

"You have hope? That things will get better for you?"

A flicker of faces passed through her mind. Ghosts from the distant and recent past. Boys from high school. Eddie. She heard Eddie's voice.

Either you come across, or you walk. . . .

She just wanted a normal life. She wanted to find something to enjoy in it. She wanted to find somebody she could have a good relationship with; she wanted to enjoy making love with him without worrying about people thinking she was a tramp. She wanted him to be there the next morning. She wanted there to be more to what they had than just a roll in the hay.

Right now, none of that seemed very possible.

"I don't know," she said finally. "I want it to. I'm not going to give up, but. . . ."

Again, faces paraded before her — this time they belonged to those lost souls of the city. The despairing.

"I know there're people a lot worse off than I am," she said. "I'm not sick; I've got the use of my body and my mind. But I'm missing something, too. I don't know how it is for other people — maybe they feel the same and just handle it better — but I feel like there's a hole inside me that I just can't fill. I get so lonely. . . ."

"You see," Jack said then. "She's mine."

Moira turned to him. "What are you talking about?"

It was Diane who answered. "He's laying claim to your unhappiness," she said.

Moira looked from one to the other. There was something going on here, some undercurrent, that she wasn't picking up on.

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"What are you *talking* about?" she asked.

"This city is ours," Diane said. "My brother's and mine. We are two sides to the same coin. In most people, that coin lies with my face up, for you are an optimistic race. But optimism carries some only so far. When my brother's face lies looking skyward, all hope is gone."

Moira centered on the words "you are an optimistic race," realizing from the way Diane spoke that it was as though she and her brother weren't human. Moira looked away, across the cityscape of bridges and tilting buildings. It was a dreamscape — not exactly a nightmare, but not at all pleasant, either. And she was trapped in it; trapped in a dream.

"Who are you people?" she asked. "I don't buy this 'Jack and Diane' bit — that's like out of that John Mellencamp song. Who are you *really*? What is this place?"

"I've already told you," Jack said.

"But you gave her only half the answer," Diane added. She turned to Moira. "We are Hope and Despair," she said. She touched a hand to her breast. "Because of your need for us, we are no longer mere allegory, but have shape and form. This is our city."

Moira shook her head. "Despair I can understand — this place reeks of it. But not Hope."

"Hope is what allows the strong to rise above their despair," Diane said. "It's what makes them strong. Not blind faith, not the certain knowledge that someone will step in and help them, but the understanding that, through their own force of will, they cannot merely survive, but succeed. Hope is what tempers that will and gives it the strength to carry on, no matter what odds are ranked against them."

"Don't forget to tell her how too much hope will turn her into a lazy cow," her brother said.

Diane sighed, but didn't ignore him. "It's true," she said. "Too much hope can also be harmful. Remember this: neither hope nor despair have power of their own; they can only provide the fuel that you will use to prevail or be defeated."

"Pop psychology," Moira muttered.

Diane smiled. "Yet, like old wives' tales, it has within it a kernel of truth, or why would it linger?"

"So what am I doing here?" Moira asked. "I never gave up. I'm still trying."

Diane looked at her brother. He shrugged his shoulders.

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"I admit defeat," he said. "She is yours."

Diane shook her head. "No. She is her own. Let her go."

Jack turned to Moira, the look of a petulant child marring his strong features before they started to become hazy.

"You'll be back," he said. That dry voice was like a desert wind, its fine sand filling her heart with an aching forlornness. "Hope is sweet — I'll admit that readily — but once Despair has touched you, you can never be wholly free of its influence."

A hot flush ran through Moira. She reeled, dizzy, vision blurring, only half-hearing what was being said. Her head was thick with a heavy buzz of pain.

But Hope is stronger.

Moira wasn't sure if she'd actually heard that, the sweet scent of blossoms clearing her heart of Despair's dust, or if it had come from within herself, something she wanted — *had* — to believe. But it overrode Despair's dry voice. She no longer fought the vertigo, but just let it take her away.

MOIRA WAS suddenly aware that she was on her hands and knees, with dirty wood under her. Where . . . ?

Then she remembered: walking across the covered bridge. The city. Hope and Despair.

She sat back on her haunches and looked around herself. She was back in her own world. Back — if she'd ever even gone anywhere in the first place.

A sudden roaring filled her head. Lights blinded her as a car came rushing up on the far side of the bridge. She remembered Eddie, her fear of some redneck hillbillies, but there was nowhere to run to. The car screeched to a halt on the wood; a door opened. A man stepped out onto the roadway of the bridge and came toward her.

Backlit by the car's headbeams, he seemed huge — a monstrous shape. She wanted to bolt. She wanted to scream. She couldn't seem to move, not even enough to reach into her purse for her switchblade.

"Jesus!" the stranger said. "Are you O.K.?"

He was bent down beside her now, features pulled tight with concern.

She nodded slowly. "I just . . . felt dizzy, I guess."

"Here. Let me help you up."

She allowed him to do that. She let him walk her to his car. He opened

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up the passenger's door, and she sank gratefully into the seat. The man looked down to the end of the bridge by which she'd entered it what seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Did you have some car trouble?" the man asked.

"You could say that," she said. "The guy I was with dumped me from his car a few miles back."

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Just my feelings."

"Jesus. What a crappy thing to do."

"Yeah. Thanks for stopping."

"No problem. Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

Moira shook her head. "I'm going back to Newford. I think that's a little far out of your way."

"Well, I'm not just going to leave you here by yourself."

Before she could protest, he closed the door and went back around to the driver's side.

"Don't worry," he said as he got behind the wheel. "After what you've been through, a guy'd have to be a real heel to — well, you know."

Moira had to smile. He actually seemed embarrassed.

"We'll just drive to the other side of the bridge and turn around, and then —"

Moira touched his arm. She remembered what had happened the last time she'd tried to go through this bridge.

"Do me a favor, would you?" she asked. "Could you just back out instead?"

Her benefactor gave her a funny look, then shrugged. Putting the car into reverse, he started backing up. Moira held her breath until they were back out on the road again. There were pines and cedars pushing up against the shoulder of the road, stars overhead. No weird city. No bridges.

She let out her breath.

"What's your name?" she asked as he maneuvered the car back and forth on the narrow road until he had its nose pointed toward Newford.

"John — John Fraser."

"My name's Moira."

"My grandmother's name was Moira," John said.

"Really?"

He nodded.

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He seemed like a nice guy, Moira thought. Not the kind who'd try to pull anything funny.

The sweet scent of blossoms came to her for just a moment, then it was gone.

John's showing up so fortuitously as he had — that had to be Hope's doing, she decided. Maybe it was a freebie of good luck to make up for her brother's bad manners. Or maybe it was true: if you had a positive attitude, you had a better chance that things would work out.

"Thanks," she said. She wasn't sure if Hope could hear her, but she wanted to say it all the same.

"You're welcome," John said from beside her.

Moira glanced at him, then smiled.

"Yeah," she said. "You, too."

His puzzled look made her smile widen.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

She just shrugged and settled back into her seat. "It's a long, weird story, and you wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Try me."

"Maybe some other time," she said.

"I might just hold you to that," he said.

Moira surprised herself with the hope that maybe he would.

With thanks to Bruce Barber for the loan of the bridge city from his work-in-progress anthology.

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Writer's Digest Books is reissuing Kit Reed's how-to book, Story First, *under a new title:* Mastering Fiction Writing. *And Kit knows how. She has written over twenty books, and countless short stories. She last appeared in F&SF in March of this year with a story called, "Tapeworm," a story about a man who is a slave of his VCR. "The Hall of New Faces" talks about a different kind of slavery . . .*

The Hall of New Faces

By Kit Reed

WOMEN SAVE ALL THEIR lives for the Hall of New Faces; all our lives we are running ahead of the knife. We look in the mirror, and we know one day our time will come. Not me, we think. Not yet.

But even you are going to get up one day and look in the mirror and think: That isn't me.

"The Hall of New Faces." Preparing herself, Maria tells her daughter, "We all end up there."

Nineteen-year-old Molly thinks: Not me. This will never happen to me. Automatically, she gives the good daughter's speech. "You'll always look beautiful to me."

But angry Maria goes to work and reads it in their eyes — withdrawal,

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contempt; she looks in their eyes and sees herself getting old. Quickly, she moves into her daughter's clumsy hug, holding fast so Molly won't see what the world knows: beginning ruin. "It won't be so bad."

"Oh Mom, promise me you won't go."

Maria will not promise anything. But the problems:

— You can sell everything you have, and you still won't have enough to do the job. What must be done will not stay done. This is the worst.

— Knowing that, you will do this. Will do it anyway. Will do it in spite of children like Molly who love you and men who care.

— The truth now: Who *hasn't* thought about it? Who among us has not looked into the mirror and thought: Oh, smoother!/ fewer wrinkles!/ less nose/ more chin? Who has failed to place her fingers at the temples and, in one fluid motion, lift slightly to make the face smooth out?

Oh God! Maria thinks wistfully, I want to be beautiful, am beautiful now, in certain lights.

— Who *wouldn't* want to be gorgeous all the time? But the consequences are harsh.

— Amazements take place in the Hall of New Faces, but, like life itself, the miracles are only temporary; some things refuse to stay done.

— You have one painful year, her friends report; your body needs time to recover from the assault, they say. They say that if fate is kind, you may have two good years in the middle, and then, in the fourth year, the results of the surgeon's artistry begin to deteriorate.

"It's like watching a time-lapse film of the picture of Dorian Grey," her friend Margaret says, or coming upon a rose that's just about to blow. "Naturally, in the fifth year, you will need to see your doctor," her best friend adds.

— At the Hall of New Faces, they prepare for your return. They initial your peach hospital gown and show you to your old room. The staff greets you warmly because over the years they will get to know you very well. "How nice to see you again."

"When you are on the cusp, you think it's silly," Margaret says. "Vanity, you say, because you're too supple to be old, but look, you're already too —what is it, drawn-looking? — to be young.

"Dangerous," Margaret says, because women collect horror stories — silicone or collagen injections that solidified or slipped down behind the victim's skin and settled in lumps in the cheeks or underneath the chin:

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tales brought back by sailors, but still . . . .

Because we are women.

Angry, Maria rails. "Why should I have to do this anyway?"

"I personally earned the thanks of a grateful nation," Margaret tells her with a laugh. "Nobody wants to look at an old bag."

Maria broods. "I mean, who am I doing it for? Myself or them?"

"Nobody wants to be ugly," Margaret says, touching her own varnished face. Currently, the only traces of her reconstruction are three minuscule scars. "Nobody wants to get old." What she means is: *Nobody wants to die.*

Maria presses fingers to her temples, and lifts. Am I running *toward* something, or away?

With the idealism of unblemished youth, Molly tells her it shouldn't matter what people look like, as long as they're good and kind and productive, but it's getting harder and harder to face the face she meets in the mirror these mornings; Maria has to do makeup before she can bear to look.

She thinks: Dammit. They should take me as I am. As an intermediary step, she begins to color her hair.

Brown spots appear, which she can't get rid of. The boss gives the plum assignment to her assistant, who is ten years younger. It's getting harder to outrun the knife. But she has these fears.

— Go too late, and the pain is hideous, and it takes forever to recover; go too soon, and you risk wrecking whatever looks you still have. If you don't go at all, society will throw you away.

Contrary to legend, Margaret tells her, beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. It is written on your face. "Listen," she says — and even wary Maria would have to admit the results of Margaret's third procedure are gorgeous — "Beauty may be only skin-deep, but believe me, it's the first thing people see."

Enough. Maria makes an appointment.

Margaret says, "Watch out for the psychiatric evaluation. At the Hall of New Faces, they refuse to do the Right Things to you if it turns out you want the Wrong Things."

"My God," Maria cries, "what do they want from me?"

"They have to make certain your motives are pure."

Maria says bitterly, "I don't have any motives. The clock is pushing me.

Margaret touches her newly smooth throat. "Then look me in the eye

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and tell me you don't care about being prettier."

A direct hit: Thock! Maria has to look away.

Then Margaret issues a caution. "Don't expect this to change your life. Looking *better* is going to have to be enough." She sighs. "But that isn't it, either. It's another holding action, O.K.?" For a fraction of a second, her new chin quivers. "All any of us wants is to go on looking the same."

As it turns out, Maria is too upset to go through with it.

Some days, in some lights, Maria thinks her excellent bony structure may see her through the catastrophe that time is writing on her face; she may shrivel like The Mummy, but she'll always have good lines. On other mornings, she meets the Yale bulldog in her mirror — the dewlaps! The strings at the neck! Rubbing in Retin-A to burn wrinkles out of aging skin, Maria thinks bitterly that she's running out of alternatives.

Hearing her mother groan, Molly says, "I don't see what you're so upset about. You still look beautiful to me."

For the first time, Maria snaps at her. "That's easy for you to say." Looking at Molly's flawless skin, she sighs. "You probably don't believe I used to be nineteen."

Unfeeling girl can't hide her incredulity.

Maria is the same person inside, but the mirror forgets. "So I'm going to do it, understand?"

"It's such a *nice* face. It's." Molly gasps. For the first time, she understands. "Oh Mom!" She sees her own future written in her mother's face. Women do.

"Listen," Maria consoles her. "You're so pretty, you'll never have the problem. Besides, this is only a business thing." It's partly true; they've just promoted her pretty assistant over her head. It's getting harder and harder to make a sale. Her new man is easily distracted, looking over her shoulder into the middle distance — for what? Somebody younger? Prettier? She thinks he loves her, but for how long?

It's almost time.

— The Hall of New Faces! Results are promised, but never guaranteed. There are atrocity stories, tales of failures, women turning out looking like Quasimodo, running away to plunge burning faces in the mud of the riverbank, blundering through the fog to hide themselves in the marsh. The face is not like fabric, she knows. It *will not stay* where you put it. Once you start, you have to keep on taking tucks. She is angrier than she is afraid.

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— Why do I have to get a new skin cut just to make it at the office?

— Why do I have to be the one who gets cut up and sewn back together just to keep our love alive?

— Why is it always us, and not the man?

— Why can't I just *be*!

She would like to go to an island where there are no mirrors. Where there are no ugly truths in other people's eyes.

— I'm too young, she thinks. Not yet. Not me. Damn you all.

Her new man loves somebody else now. It's her former assistant, from the office.

It's time.

MOLLY, DON'T look like that!" Maria has just broken the news.

"I'm not going to let you do it," Molly says. "You don't even need it," she says.

"You can't stop me," Maria says. Now that she has made up her mind, she's like an astronaut at the launch. She won't let anything stop her now.

"Oh Mom, what if they hurt you? What if you die?"

"It's not life-threatening." I don't think.

If it can happen to you, it can happen to me. "What if they ruin you?"

"This isn't like that. Really." Maria parrots the surgeon. "A really simple procedure. Like liposuction," Maria says too loud. "Laser surgery, just a few tucks. You don't feel a thing."

Walleyed with anxiety, Molly sees the rest. She has inherited her mother's body. Their futures are linked. Damage Maria, and you hurt Molly. "I don't want to have my face cut!"

"Sh-sh," Maria tells her daughter. "It isn't happening to you." Yet. Poor child! Between now and then, they may find a cure for aging. Pigs may fly. Oh listen; the world might change.

Molly is gnawing her knuckles. She cuts to the chase. "What if they make me look like somebody else?"

"Shh shh. It's not nearly your turn. Oh Molly," Maria says sadly, giving it all away. "If only you had been born a boy."

Molly winces as if struck. "Oh Mom!"

Maria knows all women have to kill their mothers in order to grow up, a fact she has managed to keep from Molly so far. Is Molly really protesting

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for her sake, or is there something more complicated going on? Maria understands she's going to have to sneak away to do the job.

She pretends to let Molly talk her out of it. "O.K., Molly," she lies.

Molly does not see her duplicity. "Oh Mom, I'm so glad."

"But I have to do *something.*" Maria tells a partial truth. "After a while, you get tired of yourself."

What she means is: *I am tired of my life.*

Marking time until she can escape Molly's scrutiny, she begins a holding action. She goes to a clinic for a chemical peel. The Egyptians used to burn the faces of their slaves to keep them beautiful. The chemicals burn her face just like the Egyptian slaves' faces; her face is painful, pink and slick as a newly healed wound, and then she scabs: it is horrible. She hides out until the skin fades from red to white. The whole time, sweet Molly says, "Why are you crying? You look beautiful to me."

Pain laces her tone with bitterness. "Oh sure."

Maria has six good months in which to complete her plan. Boyfriend says she looks lovely; boss asks if she's lost weight. Then, to her despair, the burned skin heals and quickly reassumes its old contours. Given a Magic Marker, she could easily chart what needs to be done to her face —and soon! But, God, like the face peel, it is only a holding action. Have to settle this for good, Maria thinks. Settle it for good and all.

Molly watches her mother with increasing anxiety. Her mother consolidates her savings, sells off paintings and the weekend house. Molly knows she ought to try to prevent what is coming, but she doesn't know what to do. One morning the girl gets up to a silent apartment, and fixes forever in her memory the way the kitchen *is:* sunlight coming in on undisturbed dusty surfaces; the untouched toaster and the silent coffee maker and, in the living room, the note. *Don't worry. Back soon.* Molly crushes the note to her chest and weeps for her mother, but when she looks in the bathroom mirror, she stops crying because tears leave her blotchy, and all this rubbing is going to damage the delicate skin around her eyes.

Back soon, the note promised, but it's been three weeks now, and Molly still hasn't heard anything.

When she calls the Hall of New Faces for information, they turn her away because, after all, she could be just anybody calling, a rival at the

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office or in love, and the business of this place is to be discreet. Some women lie to their friends when they come here; they go home radiant, and the boss asks: Have you lost weight?

Maria is incommunicado somewhere deep within the Hall of New Faces. She will emerge a changed woman, Molly is certain — but changed to what?

"Don't worry," good old Margaret says when Molly calls her in a panic. "Sometimes they have to take fat out of your thighs to pad your face, and it takes weeks to heal. It's nothing. They may need to transplant a little bone to enhance the jaw, and sometimes . . . ."

"Oh stop!"

Molly is wild. She has to find out where her mother is. Has Maria been stashed in some cell at a thousand a night while they do the psychiatric evaluation, or is she lying in the dark with damp gauze lightly resting on her face, or have they locked her up forever because the job was hideously botched?

Margaret says women who emerge safely from surgery in the tall, glittering hospital building always recover in the small hotel across the street. They share the lounge and the dining room with out-of-towners who are waiting their turn. When Molly goes to the hotel to check, they claim her mother isn't registered. Is this the truth?

At the Hall of New Faces, everyone is painfully discreet.

Molly decides to find out by working from inside. Security clearance at the hospital takes six months — too long — so, although she's a law student with a promising career, she drops everything to wait tables in the hotel dining room.

The recovering women don't mix with the women waiting for their faces to be rearranged. There is a mystique to having your face done, more: they are in pain and covered with bruises, and waiting for the swelling to go down. Still, the bruises look faint to Molly, the scars small, the swelling minimal, so that even from a distance, the survivors are probably an inspiration to the women still waiting for the knife. The veterans are mysterious and slightly superior, like those who slough off the questions of anxious virgins: You'll know soon enough. Be cool.

Every once in a while, a successful new face drops in to swoop down on the other women at the tables in an aura of furs and perfumes: See how wonderful I am! Without exception the others fuss and exclaim; it's the

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least they can do. And the returning beauty? Glowing as she is, she wears something designed to distract: photogray aviator glasses or a hat with a tiny polka-dotted veil.

Molly brings the alumna her Perrier with failing heart; when she finds Maria, is she going to be able to recognize her mom?

The aspirants chatter nervously because the wait for a bed in the hospital is long. It's depressing, listening to the list of reasons they are here.

*** "The children have left home, and he's gone all day at the office, and I'm so alone."

***"I'm doing it because I came home and found my new man in bed with my teenager."

***"People are secretly making fun of me. They *condescend.*"

***"It's a business thing. Nobody wants to buy insurance from an old broad."

***"I don't get wrinkles, but I've always hated my nose."

***"He says he loves me, but he treats me like his mom."

***"It's simpler than divorce."

The women give all these reasons, but then there is always something more. Molly sees this written in their faces: *It isn't really my face I'm trying to change. It's my life.*

In the hotel kitchen, Molly discovers they are preparing food for twice as many people as she sees in the dining room. Where are these trays going, covered as they are and stacked on a rolling steam table? Is there another dining room somewhere? With the practiced air of someone who has counted every step on his appointed route, Louie the blind man rolls the table into the service elevator.

"Who are the trays for?"

"Don't ask," one of the waiters tells Molly, casting his eyes to the heavens.

The old cook scowls. "Believe me, you don't want to know."

But as was bound to happen, blind Louie of the steam trays gets sick and stays home from work one day. The waiters aren't allowed upstairs —no men! — and so it falls to Molly to go up in the elevator with the steam table. Her instructions are not to bother the recovering patients in the rooms on the fourth floor; she's supposed to leave trays outside each door. Cook says, "They know the food is coming, so don't even bother to knock."

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Cook lowers his voice. "They don't want you to *see* them that way."

Excited, Molly thinks: *They won't mind me.*

"Dinner," she says cheerily outside the first closed door, and before the woman inside can say, Do Not Disturb, Molly has opened it and carried the tray in. For the first time, she can get one of these women alone. She can ask about the hospital; maybe one of them has seen Maria, and Molly can find out how her mother *is.*

"You had to find out sometime," the first patient says with enormous dignity. The second sees Molly looking at her and weeps. No wonder they told her not to open any doors. Except for nurses who change dressings and IV bottles for these victims of misbegotten operations, nobody is allowed to see the women on the fourth floor. The horror stories women tell: the victims are all here.

She supposes there are a few successful surgeries represented here, women who are only temporarily disfigured but in terrible pain, but she can't tell who will get better and who won't. Weeping with compassion, she opens every door. Going from worse to worse yet, trying to find a kind word to say to each of the women, she discovers the rest. In one a severed facial nerve creates an ineradicable scowl; in another, one side of the mouth droops in a perpetual sneer.

"You look fine, you do; listen, you can still go home," Molly says with false cheer. She knows as well as these women do that even if they do get up enough nerve to go among the people, the fixed expressions forever doom their best efforts. No matter what they do or say, they will be misunderstood.

Starved for company, they seize on Molly, and every one of them has a story to tell.

— There's the woman whose skin has been drawn so tight so many times that she can no longer eat in public because her lips won't close, and no matter how careful she is, the food falls out of her mouth.

— She meets the woman who can't sleep because her skin's been drawn so tight that her eyes won't close.

— Molly talks to victims of silicone accidents, liposuction disasters in which the bottom halves of faces disappear as if decayed by leprosy, sees faces distorted by misplaced collagen and fat transplants, people whose wounds became infected and whose faces have been eaten away by the ravages of uncheckable staph — and the victims are women all. In spite of

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the claims of the magazines, which suggest that the nip and the tuck are common to rising executives, those things don't happen to men.

Molly is too distraught to dwell on the body catastrophes: the carved-away bellies with internal organs punctured in the process, oops; thighs liposuctioned to bony shanks. Bodywork goes on in the Hall of New Faces, but Molly cannot contemplate it now.

In the last room of all, weeping Molly leans close as the last patient whispers her request. Unpracticed as she is, Molly squirts artificial tears into the eyes of the woman whose eyes won't close. Gently, she inserts the glass straw into a mouth that has been reduced to the size of a buttonhole by escalating feats of corrective surgery. The woman who can't sleep also cannot close her mouth.

The cosmic horror story, then, is not anything Molly saw at the movies. It's not about things that seep or ooze or about ax-wielding corpses that pounce upon unwary teenagers copulating in summer camps. (She murmurs, "Oh Mom!")

It's about what women do to themselves.

Here is Molly, frantic with fear for her mother and teetering on the brink of the next discovery. Once she has dropped the last tray and turned to run, she does not go back to the elevator; instead, she rips off the hotel apron and the perky hat, and stuffs them into a standing ashtray, and heads for the emergency stairs. She has to get out of here. She has to break into the Hall of New Faces and pray to God she is in time to rescue her mom.

Getting in turns out to be easier than she'd thought. The pastel lobby is completely accessible, papered in silver and upholstered and carpeted in mauve. On the walls, photographic blowups of successful operations make her think her mother may be all right. The outsized photos of cosmetic triumphs smile standard smiles and look at her out of standard eyes set just *so* in faces pared, trimmed, and chiseled into classic — or is it standard? — shapes. Molly is pretending to admire the photos, trying to decide where to start, when she hears her own name. Astounded, she wheels.

Behind the boomerang-shaped Lucite reception desk, the receptionist has called her name. When Molly turns a blanched, expressionless face in helpless acknowledgment, the receptionist says, "Ah, yes, I thought so. Your mother is waiting to see you on Five."

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And Maria? She is not in much pain anymore; the swelling is almost gone, and the anger that's simmered in her ever since girlhood has bubbled to the surface, expressed itself, and been assuaged. She is at peace.

Like a figure in an old Joan Crawford movie, Maria sits in her chair in partial shadow; although it is night, she has half-turned to the window so Molly won't need to see everything that has happened all at once. When loyal Molly knocks on the door, Maria cries, "Oh sweetie, I'm so glad you came. It's O.K., Molly. Don't worry; I'm fine." Conscious of the fact that her daughter is still lurking just beyond the sill, apprehensive and taking cover behind the open door, Maria says, "Listen; it's all done."

Molly can't bring herself to come in.

"Understand: I got what I wanted," her mother says.

When Molly does not respond, Maria says in a strong voice, "I did."

Still shaken by her experience in the small hotel across the street, Molly hangs back. Her mother knows her well enough to understand. She calls out, in a staunch, hearty, good-old-mother tone, "Listen, darling. I've found a way to solve the problem. If we're all brave enough, we can solve the problem once and for all." She gives an artificial little laugh. "Hey, it may even become chic."

Maria keeps talking as Molly advances; her daughter is peeking around the edge of the door; now she is advancing into the darkened room. "When I first got here, I did a lot of thinking. I researched the pressures, and I researched the possibilities."

Good, smart, tough lady, Molly thinks; she says brokenly, "Oh Mom."

"You can't say I didn't fight the good fight," Maria says. She is remembering the unending morning workouts, the cold packs, the face peel, certain side effects of Retin-A. "But what we're up against here isn't nature; it's the society."

Right on, Mom, Molly thinks. Damn straight. From this distance, shadowed as she is, Maria seems like her old self, Molly thinks. She has to be. Molly says, with dawning relief, "So you changed your mind."

"Right." Maria cuts her off. She says, with force, "Up to a point."

If Maria is still in shadow, Molly thinks, it is for a reason. Frightened, she begins to back out.

Her mother's voice rivets her. "Wait!"

She does wait, but she *will not look.*

"We all hate what age does to our faces, but there are worse things,"

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Maria says. She will not understand that even now, when she is so close to being right, she has it wrong.

"That we do to ourselves."

"We hate ourselves when what we ought to hate is what people do to us."

"The surgeons," Molly says. *Yes!*

"No. Time. Age. *Everybody.*" For the first time, pain creeps into Maria's voice. "Our rivals. Our men. What they make of us. What they expect."

Oh Mom!

"Nobody cares what we do. All they see is how we look. Why should I have to feel guilty for getting old? Well, I won't. Molly, listen." Her voice is deep now, loving, strong. "I'll never feel guilty again."

Molly gasps in relief. "You've decided not to have the operation."

"No. I've solved everything." Maria goes on in a burst of beautifully skewed logic, "If you're going to do something, you might as well do it right, and the beauty of this is, I have to do it only once."

"Mother, what —"

"You'll see." In this mood, in this light, she even sounds like Joan Crawford — a woman's face! What is Maria hiding? She won't be hiding it much longer. As Molly watches with a sense of inevitability, Maria lifts her hand to turn on the stand lamp over the chair, and, in the same fluid motion, she swivels so Molly will see precisely what she has done. "In my own way, I'm a pioneer. You can look now. Understand: I'm never getting old!" Her voice drops to a confidential rasp; it is gutty, sexy, final. "And if I do, nobody's ever going to know."

Molly stuffs her first in her mouth and screams.

The face her mother turns to her is as bland and smooth as an egg's. There is nothing on it, no brow, no nose, nothing but slits for the eyes and a slit where the mouth used to be. There are no wrinkles. No features. Nothing at all.

She is gleeful, half-mad. "You see?"

Maria has had her face removed.

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"Barriers" marks G. David Nordley's first appearance in F&SF. He describes himself as "a recently retired, forty-something astronautical engineer" who now splits his time managing real estate investments and writing. His sales were to Analog. *About the story, he writes, "'Barriers' came from my Thanksgiving call home to Minneapolis, in lieu of paying the jacked-up air fares. I found myself imagining use of some very advanced, holograpic, conferencing capabilities to 'virtually' attend the dinner." But as he thought about the procedure, he realized it would have some very specialized problems.*

Barriers

By G. David Nordley

THE TABLES DIDN'T meet exactly that Thanksgiving. Not so bad, I grudgingly admitted, for a twelve-year-old script being acted out across four and a third light-years. There was just a little offset: Jenny's plate was a millimeter or two ahead of mine. That was all the difference that met the eye, just enough to notice the barrier if you knew what to look for.

Their side, as usual, was a mirror image of ours: Uncle Ted even had their turkey legs pointed to his left to match Dad's turkey with its legs to the right. The china, of course, was exactly the same, including the two pieces from Grandmother's collection that had gone with them when they left for Alpha Centauri. Just a traditional family get-together. Sure it was.

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We all filed in together and waved at each other just like the script said. Aunt Lucy carried in a plate of dressing that was probably just as good as Mom's and looked exactly like it now. Last year, she hadn't been able to get all the ingredients, but things had apparently gone better this year. A good harvest at the colony, I guessed. Cousins Billy and Linda were bigger and in school now, but otherwise not changed much. They were still kids, and we wouldn't get to see them in their teens for a few more years.

Traditions are nice, but they feel a little stultifying when they are so rigorously enforced. Of course there was no choice; if any of us failed to follow the script Dad and Uncle Ted had worked out ten years ago, it would ruin the little illusion for everyone else. This was a once-a-year fantasy, of course, a charade put on by two stubborn men, twin brothers who needed to pretend they were still together. But we all went along with it for their sakes.

So we each followed our cues, walked up to the line that divided our families, and said our hellos to our counterparts as if there were nothing between us, as if the family were whole again, and all the space that had come between us were just a bad dream.

My sister, Sally, walked up to little Cousin Linda on their side of the table and talked about the great time she was having as a sophomore at Rice. "The social life is on a beam line, like from here to there at double cee," she said with impossible hyperbole. "I've been seeing this guy in my vidlit class who's a real amphibian, takes me to all the dives. . . ." And so on. I kind of smiled to myself wondering what kind of message she was sending about herself to the twenty-four-year-old woman who would actually be on the other side.

Cousin Linda just started speaking when her turn came, like it said on the script, and Sally had to shut up in mid-sentence. Linda had made the ninth-grade cheerleading squad and had been on her first date. She'd taken pictures of the sun through the school telescope and had her own vegetable garden taking up half the wall of her room.

Cousin Billy matched Bobby's height and interest in baseball. His big news was that they had an honest-to-God ball field now, under a dome where they could fit four little League Games in at once. Bobby related his own junior high exploits and how he'd managed to get a seat in the sixth game of the World Series this year and watched the Twins win their thirteenth title against Caracas.

Then it was my turn to talk to Jenny. At thirteen, she was more beautiful than I remembered, and as I looked at the young teenager in front of me, slim

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and tan in a simple white shirt and skirt, I tried to think of what she'd look like at my age. That got my heart thumping, and I almost forgot what I was going to say. But as soon as I started talking, the dam burst, and the words poured out.

"... and it looks like I'll get a 3.0 grade point for my first semester, if I can just keep this up. If my Astro Engineering major holds up two more years," I laughed, "I'm going to come see you someday. I've gone to a few dances, but the women aren't as pretty as you. Got a friend named Mary that can really waltz, though. We're going to try to get on Ball Time doing a classic J. S. Or maybe the new Merry Widow Fantasy by the Leher Layers. It's all a three-hundred-year retro time warp — you should see all the Maria Theresa hair on campus. Mary's just a friend, though. Fun in her own way, but she's an ultimate groundhog. Not someone I'd take to Miller's Pond."

That was our secret, what we had done at Miller's Pond at five in the morning that exciting, sad last week before the split; the last time we were allowed to touch each other. A lot of people think you can't fall in love at eight, but I think we were. At least she said so. So we'd made a sort of comic attempt to do it, which amounted to nothing but a lot of bare-naked hugging, which was kind of nice anyway. I'd been losing my best friend, whom I'd explored all the woods with, made snow angels with, and created awful poison potions of mud and weeds with to feed to Cousin Billy. I wish I could have held on to her forever. But we were scared to death of what our parents would do if they caught us, so we said good-bye and got back to our respective homes before the adults woke up.

I told her some more stuff about winning a state fair prize, and then it was her turn.

"I've got all my Girl Scout badges," she said. "Mom and I grew the biggest tomato in the community. I've read all the Nancy Drew on Mars books you sent me last Christmas. Linda wants me to try out for cheerleaders next year, but I'd rather play moonball — if we get enough kids for the team. Dad's trying to make a real violin out of fiberglass and glue. No electronics, just like they used to be. If it works, I'm going to learn how to play it."

She went on about classes, stupid boys, and neat teachers while I looked at her, a college junior eating my heart out. For the last couple of years the families were together, we'd just assumed we were going to get married when we grew up, first cousins or not. Maybe if we'd told someone.... It probably wouldn't have made any difference.

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"I really miss you," she finished, and there were tears in her eyes, too.

Then we all sat down, said the family grace together right on cue, and got down to the food, passing comments across the line about how good everything was. Jenny kept glancing at me, and I at her, while we ate. I knew that because I was doing some serious looking myself, imagining that she was five years older and not wearing anything under the white blouse.

When she wasn't eating, or looking at me, she was writing something on the palm of her hand. What happened next was kind of weird, like she was reading my mind retroactively. When Uncle Ted and Dad, at exactly the same time, started knocking their wineglasses with spoons, and she knew I'd be looking, she flashed me a note. Well, not flashed; she held it up for a whole minute, grinning, hoping no one would notice on her side. It didn't matter on our side, of course.

Come to the corner with me after the plum pudding, the note said, *and I'll show you something you didn't see at Miller's Pond.*

We all finished the plum pudding right on schedule as we had on the previous ten occasions, and then she got up from her chair and went over to the corner where the inviolable line met the wall of the room and stood with her back to her family, but turned toward the wall so her back was sort of turned to us, too. I got up and followed her and did the same thing, mirror image, thinking she'd have to do that again ten years from now, or things would look pretty silly.

She stared at where my face would be before I got there, and kept staring until I felt, ridiculous as it might seem, that we were communing somehow. Then she looked down, and I saw that she had opened the front of her shirt so that I could clearly see the just-thickened cone and budding nipple of her brand-new right breast. I looked up again and saw her face with an expression of . . . what? Pride? Love? Naughtiness? Defiance? There were the beginnings of tears in her eyes as she refastened her shirt.

Then she did the unthinkable, breaking all the rules, admitting that this was all an act, a charade. And yet at the same time making this Thanksgiving dinner the most memorable, before or since. She put out her left hand, the one she had written on, and placed it right on the barrier, flush against the glass or whatever it was on her side, proving it existed, proving that our families were now utterly separated by a barrier of space and time that, in the previous century, would have been inconceivable to anyone but astronomers.

With this act, she admitted that she was an image, transmitted four point

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three years ago from a moon of the second planet of Alpha Centauri B, held for another eight and half months until Thanksgiving; that she was really an unknowable eighteen now, wondering if the twenty-year-old who was receiving the message she had sent five years earlier thought she was mature enough. Written on the palm were the words: "I will wait twenty years."

I said out loud: "I'll do it, Jenny. Somehow. I'll really try." If, at thirteen, she had the guts to defy space and time, so did I.

"You'll do what?" Bobby wanted to know.

"Stifle it. Kid. Later."

Jenny and I, appearing to move in unison despite the 30 trillion kilometers and five years between us, went back to our seats to listen to the after-dinner speeches of our parents: the ones we loved out of duty — and secretly hated for tearing us apart when we were too young and too afraid to protest; the ones who carried on this annual tableau that mocked our need to interact, to touch, to feel each other in all voluptuous senses of that word. But we would rebel. Oh yes, we would rebel though it cost us half our lives.

FIVE YEARS later I went to the corner again in synchronization with a very self-possessed young lady with a glint of laughter in her eye and perhaps a slight blush of embarrassment on her face. But the will was still there; she had written *fifteen years* on her palm this time.

I've got my commission, I wrote on mine. *I'm coming.*

I knew that was my last Thanksgiving at home; my first billet would leave from Earthport in January, and astronauts aren't often home for holidays. The old high-resolution holoscreen worked as well as ever, but I could tell Mom and Dad were becoming a little blasé about things. Aunt Lucy had just gotten out of the hospital and served roast beef instead of turkey. In five years the traditional comments about the traditional recipe wouldn't fit. Uncle Ted's hair didn't match Dad's; it wasn't white yet — it was like looking at Dad five years ago. You could see Dad thinking about how much he'd aged.

Except for Jenny and me, the synchronization wasn't nearly as good, either, on Uncle Ted's end or on ours. Bob and Bill traded notes on twenty-second-century chromaticists instead of baseball, talking right over each other. Sally was on Mars and didn't make it, leaving Cousin Linda to talk to an empty spot on our side of the line. Of course, Linda wouldn't know that until five years later, when she probably wasn't there herself. We finished desert

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early and had to wait ten minutes. But with four Thanksgivings in the pipeline, so to speak, no once quite had the heart to call it quits. I suppose they're still doing it after some fashion.

Fifteen years, I thought as the *John Young* docked at *Caroline Herschel Station;* seventeen for her. After four maddening hours of shutdown chores, I was free, and hustled to the arrival lounge, still in uniform, crew bag over my shoulder, on a fool's errand.

But she was there, traces of frost in her hair, if anything, slimmer and more elegant than her last picture. A study in professorial dignity. There was no sign of a husband or boyfriend. She didn't recognize me at first — must have been the gray in my beard. But a supernova would have had a hard time competing with that grin when she caught on to who I was. Then it was all tears and embraces and to hell with dignity and whatever the bystanders thought.

Yeah, I was two years late. It had taken me five years of bouncing around the solar system to finally wrangle a billet on the *Young.* But I'd called ahead and asked for a little more time.

"What," she asked me, "is two years in the face of eternity?" and she showed me the palm of her hand. I laughed because she had written there the same thing I'd written on mine: *I love you.*

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

SALVAGING THE LIBRARY OF LIFE

In my last column here I argued that the next century will probably be dominated by the biological sciences. Even if this is so, a great cloud looms over that same horizon, and it is also biological.

Consider: We have only begun the elementary counting and description of the world biota. Each species contains genetic variations of potential use, and at least of scientific interest. While about 1.4 million species have been given scientific names, estimates of the total number of species range up to roughly 30 million, with some guessing 100 million.

This means we may very well not know the species diversity of the world flora and fauna to the nearest order of magnitude!

Yet time is running out in which we can even catalog our living wealth. Very conservative estimates of the current extinction rate give roughly 5000 species lost annually, at least several species per day. Some suspect the true level may be 30,000 per year.

And so we accelerate toward a calamity unparalleled in planetary history.

The best known cause of present day species extinction is the cutting of tropical forests. They have lost about 55% of their original cover of, say, two centuries ago—and are shrinking at the rate of 1.8% per year.

We now co-opt about 40% of plant growth worldwide, favoring monocultural crops, which must greatly affect genetic diversity. Given the blunt economic and cultural forces at work, even slowing the rate of destruction seems doubtful in the immediate future.

Worse, the rate seems doomed to increase, since its ultimate cause is human activity, and human numbers and expectations grow apace. To improve the economic lot of a swelling human tropical population

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would require at least a fivefold increase in economic activity there, bringing a crushing load on the already strained biosphere.

Other biological zones such as coral reefs and oceanic islands also dwindle at alarming rates. Because warmer regions host the greatest species diversity, losses are most severe in precisely the tropical continents where our own numbers swell so alarmingly.

Everywhere there are calls for a halt to tropical deforestation. In October 1991 I gave a reasonably optimistic speech about our future at Caltech's Centennial Celebration. It was a festive occasion, studded with Nobel Prize winners, amusing stories, wry wisdom—a testament to the rise of science and technology in our era.

But then, listening to the biologists' full-day review of our biological prospects, I got quite gloomy. Paul Ehrlich and Edward Wilson despairingly suggested that we could lose a quarter of all species in half a century, with incalculable effects on our biosphere.

I came away from the Caltech Celebration quite sobered. If the experts were pessimistic, what should a relative layman like me feel?

One point loomed over all else—that this dire moment demands radical thinking. In the half year since, in the spirit of a thought experiment, I've begun discussing publicly a proposal which I'll admit startled me, too, when I first thought of it.

I feel it is time that we take seriously the possibility that all the good will by an alarmed minority will, finally, fail. In so doing, this idea links the so-called in situ preservation community—which emphasizes protecting wild areas, keeping species in their present situation—and the ex situ conservationists such as zoos, botanical gardens, etc., which keep species far from their natural homes.

For in situ measures there are economic, environmental and aesthetic arguments—that's what the public thinks of when you appeal for conservation. To preserve the genome of many species, though—that is, the genetic record—ex situ methods may suffice. And they could be easier politically and economically.

Considering this possibility serves to separate the kinds of arguments we make for conservation methods, including concepts of our moral debt to posterity. In the spirit of sharpening debate by considering plausible scenarios, we can test our ideas.

Our situation resembles a browser in the ancient library at Alexandria, who suddenly notes that

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the trove he had begun inspecting has caught fire. Already a wing has burned, and the mobs outside seem certain to block any fire-fighting crews. What to do?

There's no time to patrol the aisles, discerningly plucking forth a treatise of Aristotle, or deciding whether to leave behind Alexander the Great's laundry list. Instead, a better strategy is to run through the remaining library, tossing texts into a basket at random, sampling each section to give broad coverage. Perhaps it would be wise to take smaller texts, in order to carry more, and then flee into an unknown future.

While efforts to contain and control our accelerating biodiversity disaster are admirable, and should be strengthened, it may well be time to consider a desperate method of salvage. I have proposed that we systematically sample threatened natural habitats, then store them for the very long term by freezing.

This would more nearly resemble an emergency salvaging operation than an inventory, for we would give minimal attention to studying the sample. The total sample mass might be reduced by judiciously trimming oft-repeated species of the prolific ants and beetles, but even that might be not worth the trouble. The essential aim is to save what we can for future generations, relying on their better biological technology to extract the maximum benefit.

Sampling of tropical trees by insecticidal fogs and active searching of the canopy is common. Teams fog an area, killing nearly everything, and then bag the species. Of course this gives you damaged specimens, but for many purposes the harm is minimal. (We may only want the DNA, after all.)

People trained to simply collect, without analyzing, require little help from pricy research biologists. Extensive work by taxonomists enters only when samples are studied and classified.

Here lies our current bottleneck, the reason why only 1.4 million species have been classified. There are far too few taxonomists to tally the world's species within our generation, let alone analyze them.

We sidestep this problem if our primary aim is to pass on to later generations the essentials of our immense biodiversity. Current methods simply aren't doing this job. Captive breeding programs, parks, microhabitats and zoos can preserve only a tiny fraction of the threatened species. Here I'll use the term "preservation" to mean keeping alive representatives of at least each genus—in situ, protection in reserves—and argue that this is essential to eventually studying and potentially resurrecting frozen

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species.

To save the biosphere's genome heritage demands going beyond existing piecemeal strategies of seed banks, of germplasm and tissue culture collection, and cryopreservation of the genetic material alone—gametes, zygotes and embryos. These programs mostly concentrate on saving traditional domesticated varieties.

Not that they are useless. The "frozen zoo" of San Diego has immersed 240 mammal cell cultures and 145 tissue pieces in liquid nitrogen—about 300 species, in all.

Still, as a culture, our goal should be a complete sample of all threatened species. We owe it to our grandchildren.

For this, freezing is essential. Banking cells by drying them with silica gels, for example, is useful for short times, but at room temperatures thermal damage to DNA will accumulate over the decades.

We know that seeds can germinate after lengthy freezing, and that microbes can sustain cryogenic (extreme cold) temperatures. Simple cells such as sperm and ova survive liquid nitrogen preservation and function after warming. Generally, organs with large surface/volume ratios preserve well, such as skin and intestines. Such capabilities are already familiar businesses. Already, the Ageria Group of Tucson, Arizona will freeze your white blood cells, for your later use when your own immune system might be compromised by age or disease—taking a loan from your past, so to speak.

Of course, more complex systems suffer great freezing damage, though research proceeds into minimizing this. Biochemical and biophysical freezing injury arises from shrinking cell volume as freezing proceeds. Several kinds of damage occur, and we know little about methods of reversing such injury.

Still, even low survival rates of one cell in a million are irrelevant if the survivor cells can produce descendants. Our minimum aim can be to simply retain DNA, the least we should expect from a sample.

For this, liquid nitrogen is suitable for long-term storage, especially since it is by far the cheapest method. At 25 cents/liter, liquid nitrogen is the lowest-priced commercial fluid, excepting water and crude oil. It allows suspension in large, easily tended vaults, simply by topping off the lost nitrogen. Only a wholesale breakdown of industry can plausibly destroy the samples; no mere power failure will do. Multiple storage at different sites avoids even this.

Further, while neither liquid nitrogen nor freeze-drying damage DNA, freeze-drying does cause far more injury to tissues. For the broad

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program envisioned here—which should also include tiny samples of ocean water, with its teeming viruses and bacteria—plainly liquid nitrogen is essential.

There's a further benefit when we save whole creatures, since we also gain their passenger parasites, bacteria, and viruses. We already know that these are very well preserved cryogenically, and can often be revived from liquid nitrogen storage today.

A crucial point is that we need not rely on present technology for the retrieval. Progress in biological recovery can open unsuspected pathways.

Recent advances underline this expectation. A technique called the polymerase chain reaction can amplify rare segments of DNA, copying them over a million-fold. Such methods have enabled resourceful biologists to recover specific segments from such seemingly unlikely sources as a 120-year-old museum specimen. That mere scrap yielded DNA of a quagga, an extinct beast that looked like a cross between a horse and a zebra.

A 5000-year-old Egyptian mummy has yielded up its genetic secrets, too. More dramatically, the man found frozen in an Alpine snowdrift in the summer of 1991 promises to yield great knowledge of his medical and genetic conditions—all apparently saved for us by a late summer snowstorm which caught him unprepared, 5000 years ago.

Genetic tricks can even amplify DNA in old bones, opening study of the bulk of surviving organic matter we have from prehistory. The most truly amazing achievement in bringing the past alive in the genetic sense is DNA extracted from a fossilized magnolia leaf between 17 and 20 million years old! Apparently the leaves settled into the oxygen-free mud of a lake, then were covered by more mud.

This feat of recovery defied earlier predictions that DNA could not survive intact beyond about 10,000 years. What's the limit on our seeing into the genetic past? Nobody knows.

We should recognize that future biological technology will probably greatly surpass ours, perhaps exceeding even what we can plausibly imagine. In keeping species samples, we should imitate archaeologists, who deliberately leave a fraction of a site untouched, assuming that future archaeologists will be able to learn more from it than they can.

We need a combined strategy to salvage biodiversity out of catastrophe. The best approach may be two-pronged:

(a) preserving alive some fraction of each ecosystem type ("biome"), keeping at least one of a closely

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related group of species (a genus), and

(b) freezing as many species related to the preserved system as possible.

What would this mean in practice? Freezing your collie, for example, while keeping a pack of canines alive in the wild. With some crafty bioengineering, someday your collie could re-emerge, mothered by a completely different breed.

At a minimum, this method would allow future biologists to extract DNA from frozen samples and study the exact genetic source of biodiversity. Genes of interest could be expressed in living examples of the same genus, by systematic replacement of elements of their genetic code with information from the frozen DNA. Obviously, the preserved genus is essential.

The biodiversity catastrophe bearing down upon us will, at a minimum, make life tough for a lot of creatures. When populations dwindle, they get into genetic trouble. With a small selection of mates, inbreeding increases.

Bioengineering techniques would open broad attacks on the problem of inbred species—if we had a Library of Life to work from. A ravaged environment can easily constrict the genetic diversity of individual species. Reintroducing diverse traits from frozen tissue samples could help such a species blossom anew, increasing its resistance to disease and the random shocks of life.

Beyond this minimum—the DNA itself—future biologists will probably find great use for recovered cells. They could use uterine walls, elements of the sexual reproductive apparatus, etc., to re-express a frozen genome.

Suppose that somehow the North American bison became extinct. Getting a future mother antelope, say, to give birth to a genetically repaired baby bison, say, will demand that we know a great deal. For example, we might not know the intricate chemistries of the lost bison womb.

Sure, the information is somewhere in the bison genes, but puzzling it out might be tedious and error-prone. It seems highly unlikely that one can make appropriate choices in the many steps from genome to newborn, merely from reading DNA.

As saviors of the Library of Life we are at best marginally literate, hoping that our children will be better readers, and wiser ones. They may read DNA in a way utterly different from our clumsy methods. Many biotechnological feats will probably emerge within a few decades—many ways, let us say, of reading and using the same genetic

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"texts." But no advanced "reader" and "editor" can work upon texts we have lost.

This holds out the hope of selectively reintroducing biodiversity in the future, to gradually recover lost ecosystems. Individual species can be resurrected from very small numbers of survivors, as the nearly extinct California condor and black-footed ferret have been.

Fidelity in reproducing a genome may not be perfect, of course. Many practical problems arise (placenta environment, chemistry, etc.) which complicate expression of a genotype.

Make no mistake about it—losing nearly all of a local ecosystem would require a huge regrowth program. Humanity has never attempted anything like it—though we've destroyed plenty of species, long ago decimating the entire middle eastern region and the Hawaiian islands.

To regenerate such vast damage, the Library of Life would prove essential. For a moment, though, suppose that we avoid the worst, and manage to save a large fraction of, say, our tropics. Would the Library of Life be pointless?

No—because then the species library will provide a genetic "snapshot" of biodiversity at a given time and place. Nobody has ever had such a research tool before.

Evolutionary biologists could then compare tropics of our time with the tropics a century or two later, as it has evolved further—through tens of thousands of insect generations. This would let us study how systems evolve on their own, and how they react to human activities.

The far larger prospect of eventually reading and using a Library of Life is difficult for us to imagine or anticipate, since we are at the very early stages of a revolution in biological technology. Our situation may resemble the Wright brothers, who could not possibly have envisioned a moon landing within three generations.

In any case, future generations may well wish to edit and shape genetically those species within an ecosystem as they repair it, for purposes we can't anticipate. That's the point—to pass on records and tools, not to determine their use.

So the eventual uses of the Library are conjectural, but plausibly important. It is surpassingly hard to estimate the practical aspects of the distant future; science fiction's successes at this have been mostly accidental.

Ah, but there is one immediate, practical question we can debate—can we afford this immensely larger Library?

Such a sweeping proposal avoids

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the problem of deciding which species are of probable use to us, or are crucial to biodiversity. By sampling everything we can, we avoid some pitfalls of our present ignorance. Too often, for example, preservation efforts focus on what some call "charismatic vertebrates"—animals that appeal to our Disney-soaked sensibilities—neglecting the great bulk of diversity, which includes a lot of rather boring or ugly creatures.

But remember, the samples need not be studied as they are taken. This avoids the scarcity of taxonomists, speeding field work and lowering costs. Plausibly, much of the gathering can be done with semi-skilled labor.

This suggests immediately that the bulk of the funding come from "debt swap" between tropical and temperate nations, as has been used with some limited success to "buy" rain forests and set them aside from cutting. Further, this will create a local work force which profits from controlled, legal forest work, rather than from cutting it.

As a very rough estimate, consider a sampling program which collects all life forms from a single stand of a hundred trees, for each hundred square kilometers of rain forest, i.e., a sampling fraction in the range of one out of a million. That would yield about a hundred kilograms of species, all jumbled together.

Suppose this costs on average a thousand dollars per tree to yield a frozen sample, and keep it in nitrogen for a century. (This is a reasonable number, given some savings from doing such large samplings.) Then a million square kilometers coverage will cost a billion dollars.

A lot of money, indeed. On the other hand, current outstanding debt by tropical nations well exceeds a hundred billion dollars.

Of course, this does not touch upon side costs in training biologists, transport, etc. The task is monumental; so is the plausible benefit. Traditional economics cannot deal with transactions carried out between generations. As Harold Morowitz has remarked, the answer to "How much is a species worth?" is "What kind of world do you want to live in?"

This drastic proposal does not address many legitimate reasons for preserving ecospheres intact, and it should not be seen as opposing them. Indeed, only by preserving a wide cross section of living creatures can we plausibly use much of the genetic frozen library.

An obvious possibility is that, for many ardent conservationists, preservation of habitat may seem to compete politically with a sampling and freezing program. There is no

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intrinsic reason why this need be so. They are not logically part of a zero-sum game, because they yield different benefits over different time scales.

Further, sampling is much less expensive than in situ preservation. Even competition for 'debt swap' funds will not necessarily be of the same kind. Conservationists seek to buy land and set up reserves, putting funds into the hands of landowners. A freezing program will more strongly spur local employment, affecting a different economic faction.

Of course, there are a lot of unappealing features to a freezing program. Freezing species does not affect the immediate benefits which preservation yields. (Samples would be taken only from areas not already highly damaged, so that we don't worsen a critical situation.) Then too, sampling and freezing has little aesthetic appeal. You can get many more dollars with pictures of big-eyed Bambis in sheltered enclaves, than with the chilly prospect of simply freezing a representative.

Then, too, to some such ideas will smack of fatalism; unfortunately, they may be merely realism.

More concretely, this proposal will not hasten benefits from new foods, medicines, or industrial goods. So there will be no quick profits. The library of Alexandria, salvaged and kept in a cave for centuries, likewise would do no one any good until people were both willing and able to read it.

More important, the Library of Life will not alter the essential services an ecosphere provides to maintenance of the biosphere. This task is explicitly designed to benefit humanity as a whole, once this age of rampant species extinction is over.

Some will see in this idea a slippery slope: to undertake salvaging operations weakens arguments for biodiversity preservation. To avoid this, the two parallel programs of preservation and freezing must be kept clear.

In this sense the analogy to the library at Alexandria is false—for us, there is no true conflict between fighting the fire and salvaging texts.

Further, in the real world, funds for conservation of DNA today do not come directly from in situ programs. If the Topeka Zoo budget is cut, the city does not transfer funds to Zaire to save gorillas.

Indeed, one can make the opposite argument—that the spectacle of the scientific community starting a sampling program will powerfully illuminate the calamity we face, alerting the world, stimulating other actions.

Beginning with local volunteer labor and contributions—say, with the Sierra club sampling the red-

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wood habitat—could generate grassroots momentum to overcome the familiar government inertia. In larger campaigns, by requiring that samplers accompany all legal logging operations, we can help develop a local constituency for controlled harvesting.

Perhaps the most difficult argument to counter is basically an unspoken attitude. Scientists are trained to be careful, scrupulous of overstating their results, wary of speculation—yet these militate against the talents needed to contemplate and prepare for a future which can be qualitatively different from our concrete present.

Paradoxically, scientists labor to bring about this changed future. Most think their work will find some positive use. Now, I think, is the time to bank on the expectation that we will probably succeed.

The Caltech celebration made me think of the species-loss problem in a way I never had—to regard it as virtually inevitable. Once you truly believe that, I believe the kind of strategy I've outlined here seems reasonable. So I've begun to try to spread this notion, so far with some success among the leading figures in the field.

After all, these same figures in biodiversity argue that a large scale species dieback seems inevitable, leading to a blighted world which will eventually learn the price of such folly. But their calls seem to go largely unheeded, even though the damage is easy to see—far more concrete, for the layman, than abstract discussions of the lofty ozone layer or statistical wranglings over greenhouse heating.

The political impact of such a disaster will be immense. Politics comes and goes, but extinction is forever. We may be judged harshly by our grandchildren, our era labeled the Great Dying or the Age of Appetite.

A future generation could well reach out for means to recover their lost biological heritage. If scientific progress has followed the paths many envision today, they will have the means to perform seeming miracles. They will have developed ethical and social mechanisms we cannot guess, but we can prepare now the broad outlines of a recovery strategy, simply by banking biological information.

Such measures should be debated, not merely by biologists, but by the entire scientific community and beyond, for all our children will be affected. These are the crucial years for us to act, as the Library of Life burns furiously around us, throughout the world.

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Lawrence Watt-Evans has won a Hugo for his short fiction. His most recent novel, Crosstime Traffic, *has just appeared from Del Rey. He makes his first appearance in F&SF with a fascinating story about the kind of dump Americans would invent, if they could.*

Spirit Dump

By Lawrence Watt-Evans

"THERE'S THIS PLACE I know," he said, perching himself on the corner of the desk, "Out past the Bannersburg landfill, near where the sheriff dumped all the confiscated booze from those moonshiners last year, that I visit when I need cheering up."

She looked up at him, startled, and then grimaced. "It's that obvious?"

"Yup." He smiled.

She sighed.

His smile vanished. "Or if you'd rather just talk about it. . . ."

She shook her head. "No," she said, "I tried that, with Angie — you know her, my apartment-mate, don't you? Well, anyway, I talked to her, and it didn't do any good."

"So what is it that's bothering you, anyway, if you don't mind my asking?"

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"That's the thing — maybe that's why talking didn't work. I don't *know* what it is. I just feel like my life . . . I don't know, like it's not going anywhere, or maybe it's . . . oh hell."

He nodded. "Well, this place I mentioned is a lot cheaper than a shrink, and it's safer than drugs; care to give it a shot?"

"Where did you say?"

"Near Bannersburg. It's about half a mile past the landfill."

"What, is it a great view or something? That's getting up in the hills, right?"

"Kind of. The view — well, there's a view, but it's not just that. It's hard to explain; it just seems like a place where you can dump your problems and worries and forget them."

She eyed him suspiciously. "And I suppose you were figuring you could drive me up there, to this place in the middle of nowhere, just the two of us, for a look at this romantic scenery?"

He put a hand on his chest, fingers spread. "*Me?*" he said, "Would I try something like that?"

"Yes." She nodded emphatically.

He laughed. "True — and if that's what would cheer you up, Suze, I'd be glad to oblige. But honestly, it wasn't what I had in mind. Look, I can give you directions, and you can drive up by yourself, or we can bring along a chaperone, or make a party of it."

"Really?" She studied his face, and saw nothing hidden there, no trace of sarcasm or spite or even lechery.

"Why are you telling me this, Paul?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Just trying to help out a fellow human being."

"That's it?"

He smiled crookedly. "Well, maybe I do have an ulterior motive — but I'm not going to tell you what it is until *after* you've seen the place."

She stared up at him for a moment, then said, "All right, you're on. But we'll bring Angie."

Angie looked out the car window and pronounced, "Yuck."

Paul laughed. "That's the landfill," he said.

"That's a dump," Angie said. "I don't care what they call it; it's a dump. They were dumps when I was a kid, and changing the name doesn't change the fact that they're still dumps."

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"They plow 'em under now, though," Paul pointed out. "It's more sanitary. The stuff doesn't just sit there collecting vermin."

"Whatever, it's still a dump, and it's ugly."

"Never said it wasn't." He glanced at Suze, and his expression dimmed; she wasn't laughing. She was staring dully out the window on the other side, watching the passing trees.

"There's nothing wrong with dumps," he said. "Gotta put all the trash somewhere, don't you?"

Angie snorted. "Dumps make me sick," she said. "When I was a kid, my Uncle Bert used to hang around the town dump — he'd shoot rats there; they paid him a bounty, maybe a quarter each, which was hardly worth the bullet. He thought it was fun, though, and he'd pick through all the stuff, and sometimes he'd bring home some of it. Old magazines, and sometimes books, and machinery parts — he used to fix my mother's washing machine, and I don't think he ever in his life paid for parts. And people throw away the damnedest things."

"Doesn't sound so bad," Paul said.

"Yeah, it was — everything he brought in stank. *He* stank. And he was filthy, always. I can still see him standing there, holding up a bunch of mangled rats by their tails. . . ."

"Well, there probably aren't any rats in the landfill back there, anyway," Paul said. "That's why they bury it all now, so rats won't get in there."

"Course, that means nobody can pick through it, either," Angie pointed out. "Uncle Bert would lose out both ways — if he hadn't drunk himself to death ten years ago."

Paul shrugged. "I guess he would," he agreed. He shook his head. "And people throw away the damnedest things."

A moment later, they turned off the main road — which wasn't exactly a highway to begin with — onto a narrow strip of dirt. Angie started away from the window as they passed within inches of the tree branches on either side.

"Shit," she said. "You sure you know where you're going?"

"I'm sure," Paul told her.

About a quarter mile from the road, the car suddenly emerged into sunlight; Paul brought it to a stop and killed the engine. "Everybody out," he announced. "We're here."

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Angie leaped out and looked around; Suze didn't move until Paul came around the car and opened her door.

She looked up at him, then reluctantly climbed out.

The three of them stood in a strip of grassy meadow atop a small ridge. Behind them were the woods, all secondary growth and brambly underbrush; ahead of them the land dropped off abruptly, a steep slope of bare earth and tuffets, perhaps fifteen or twenty feet high. Grass and wildflowers filled the gap between trees and drop, which varied from about a dozen feet in width to as much as forty.

At the foot of the slope, the scrub forest gradually resumed, starting with grass and weeds, graduating through thorns and briars to bushes, a few browning evergreens, and finally to crowded, unhealthy maple and ash.

Suze looked around, appalled.

"*This* is your great scenic spot?" she demanded.

Angie said, "Looks more like Uncle Bert's old hang-out, only without the trash. They'd throw it all down the slope and let it pile up at the bottom."

"Hey, I said it wasn't the view that mattered — though I'd like to point out that you can see Sugarloaf if you look over that way." He pointed to the distant mountain, a blue lump on the horizon.

"So what is it, then?" Suze asked.

"Come here and I'll show you," Paul told her, marching up to the very brink and beckoning her forward.

Slowly, reluctantly, she approached.

"Come on," he said. "I'm not going to push you over or anything."

Both women came up to stand beside him.

"Now," he said. "Look down the slope, and tell me what you see."

Obediently, the two peered over the edge.

"Nuthin'", Angie told him.

Suze blinked.

"Not even a beer can, right?" Paul asked.

"I don't know," Suze said. "It's. . . . I don't see anything, but it *feels* like there's something down there."

Paul nodded.

"O.K., Suze," he said. "I want you to take all that anger and depression and whatever it is that's got your spirit so weighed down lately, and I want

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you to gather it all up into a big lump and throw it down there."

She turned to stare at him. "What?"

"Like a visualization exercise," he said. "Like in meditation or biofeedback, or something. Just concentrate on it, think of it as if it were a real, tangible thing, and throw it down there."

Suze hesitated.

"Oh, go ahead," Angie said. "Can't hurt to try."

"All right."

She concentrated. She thought of the gloom as a big gray something that had hung down over her, and suddenly she could *see* it — she could see this dark, foul thing, half-cloud, half-slime, that was covering her —and she reached up with both hands and heaved it up, revolted by the feel of it, heaved it up and flung it out over the brink. It fell, streaming grayish gunk that settled after it in a noisome, clinging cloud.

And suddenly she felt better than she had in weeks.

She blinked, and realized that the day was warm and sunny, that even though the trees down there were thin, their leaves were green and bright, the sunlight golden on the ground. The wildflowers on the ridgetop were cheerful, like a scattering of children's drawings. A monarch butterfly was vividly orange as it fluttered from one blossom to the next.

"Wow," she said.

Angie looked at her, startled.

Paul grinned. "Worked, huh?"

"How did you do that?" Suze demanded — but she wasn't angry; she felt too good to be angry. She was just curious.

"*I* didn't do anything," Paul told her. "*You* did."

"Come on," Suze insisted, grinning.

"No, really! Or really, it's this *place* that did it. Take a look over the side, there — carefully."

A bit doubtful, Suze approached the edge as closely as she dared, and looked down.

"What am I supposed to see?" she asked.

Angie, beside her, said, "I don't see a damn thing but rocks and dirt."

"Suze," Paul said, "try to see that bad mood you threw down there."

"I won't get it back, will I?" she asked, with just the faintest trace of apprehension.

"No, no, of course not!"

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She glanced at him, then stared back down the slope trying to recall what that gray squirming mess had looked like. . . .

And there it was.

And there was a great deal more.

She saw, faintly but definitely, gray and black and sick brown and bilious green and hot red, and gray and more gray. The slope was covered with the stuff, with oozing blobs and barbed chunks and a hundred other hazy, intangible shapes.

"Oh my God," she breathed.

"People throw away the damnedest things, don't they?" Paul asked her, grinning.

"What?" Angie shouted, "What is it? What's down there?"

"What *is* all that stuff, Paul?" Suze asked.

"Well," he said, pointing, "that spiky reddish thing is that bout of bad temper I had last summer and just couldn't get rid of. The dark, oily thing there is from when my mother was thinking about suicide — I brought her out here. But most of them I don't know; they were here before I ever saw the place."

Angie was staring at him, he realized. She probably thought it was a joke, he told himself.

"I learned about it from my grandfather," Paul explained. "And he claimed to have heard about it from an old Indian who said this was the place where men could come and leave whatever evil spirits were troubling them. Granddad called it the spirit dump."

"I never believed in any of that stuff," Suze said, still staring down the slope.

Paul shrugged. "I don't know if it's evil spirits, or if it's something in the air here, or magnetic fields, or maybe it's all hallucinations; I just knew that it worked for me, and that it seemed to work for my mother, and Granddad said it worked for him. And I wanted to see if it would work for everybody, or if maybe it was just my family — or just my imagination. And when you'd been in a funk for the past week, I figured it was a chance to find out."

"What are you *looking* at, Suze?" Angie demanded. "Ain't nothin' down there!"

Suze shuddered. "All that stuff . . .," she murmured. She stepped back from the edge.

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"Let's get back in the car," she said. "I'll tell you about it later."

PAUL SAT at his desk, tapping a pencil on the blotter as he watched Suze talking brightly to Roger and Amy. He frowned.

He hadn't told her to keep the spirit dump secret; he hadn't thought it was necessary. He didn't suppose it could really hurt if more people found out about it; after all, from the amount of stuff accumulated there already, plenty of people had known about it over the years.

Still, it bothered him. Suze was practically advertising the place, like a missionary seeking converts. Roger and Amy were just the latest in a long series.

But then, why shouldn't she proselytize? What could happen? Was he afraid that the magic would get used up somehow?

Maybe that was it.

Or maybe he was just being selfish; he had this wonderful cure-all, and he was being asked to share it, and he wanted it all for himself.

Maybe that was it. He tapped harder.

When the pencil broke, he went back to his paperwork.

By the end of the second week, his agitation had reached such a level that it was interfering with his work, with his driving, with everything.

Obviously, the thing to do was to drive out to the spirit dump and chuck his worry over the cliff. That would prove that the place still worked, for one thing.

So, Saturday morning, he headed out past the Bannersburg landfill.

There were fresh tire tracks at the turnoff, several of them. He realized he had a headache.

Along the narrow access road, a tree branch snapped off against his window, the broken end dragging across the side of his car, and his head began pounding.

And when he reached the strip of meadow and found a Chrysler minivan half-blocking his path, so that he had to steer carefully between its rear bumper and the trees in order to get out into the clearing, the headache was unbearable. Enraged, he climbed out and shouted.

Faces turned toward him, half a dozen faces — people he didn't even know. He marched out toward them.

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"Hey, Paul," someone called.

Paul followed the voice and spotted Roger. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Roger grinned at him and shrugged. "Suze told us about this place," he said, "so we thought we'd check it out."

Paul stared at him for a moment, then stamped on up to the edge of the cliff and peered over, forcing himself to not just look, but to *see.*

The mass of spiritual debris lay upon the barren slope, stretching a hundred yards in either direction, but with the largest concentration directly below him. And there had been dozens of new additions since his last visit — most of them small, most of them thin and gray and relatively harmless-looking, but still, *dozens.* More, he thought, than had been added in all the years he had been coming here.

"What have you been throwing down there?" he bellowed.

"Nothing much," someone answered.

"A hangover," someone else said, evoking laughter from two or three others. Paul saw that it was one of the strangers, a big, overweight man with ragged black hair. He was holding an open can of beer.

"A *hangover*? For Christ's sake, a hangover goes away by itself!"

"Yeah, well, I'd rather have it doing it down there than in me," the fat man retorted.

"And how do you know it will? Maybe it'll just sit down there and fester!" Paul shouted.

"So what?"

"So d'you want this to *fill up*? What happens then?"

The fat man shrugged.

"Damn it, you get down there and get that hangover back!" Paul ordered.

The fat man snorted. "You're crazy," he said.

"*Get down there!*"

Paul charged.

The fat man sidestepped and swung an arm to fend off his attacker; Paul, half-blind with fury and the pain of his headache, stumbled directly into the blow.

At first, he didn't know what happened; he knew he was falling, that the grass had gone out from underneath his feet, but he thought he would land on his back on the meadow.

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Then he realized that it was taking too long, and an instant later he slammed backward into the bare dirt and rolled, involuntarily.

He tried to catch himself, but all he managed to do was to turn his roll into a slide; he still wound up at the bottom of the slope.

At the bottom of the slope, and *underneath* the contents of the dump.

Despair washed over him, thick gray drowning despair, as he lay on his back, trying to gather his senses. He stared up at a sky gone the color of mud, and a sun gone dim and brown, and the futility of it all filled him, pressed down on him. Simply to breathe took an effort, and it was horribly tempting to just stop, to let his breath out and forget to take another. . . .

He reached up and pushed the thing off him, and the sun was bright again, the sky blue. His head still hurt, and one foot stung oddly, but the suffocating hopelessness was gone.

Whoever had thrown *that* down here, he thought, had done the right thing.

He looked around. He was sitting on the bare dirt, near the bottom of the slope, and all around him were the vague, indistinct shapes and colors of the dump's contents. Above, at the top of the slope, Roger and half a dozen strangers were staring worriedly down at him.

It didn't look like a particularly difficult climb — except that it went right through the center of the dump.

Frowning, he looked around. Could he go down the slope the rest of the way, and around?

No; the dump extended well past him, down to the trees, almost as great a distance as that to the meadow atop the ridge. And the walk around either end would be a good long one, from the look of it.

So he would just have to climb straight up the slope.

"Are you all right?" Roger called.

"I'm O.K.," Paul called back.

"Can you get back up?"

"Sure," he said. He got to his feet — or tried to.

There was something clinging to one leg, something sharp and rusty brown, something that stung, that seemed to twang every nerve and tendon in his ankle. He winced, reached down, and plucked it off.

It burned his hand, and he flung it quickly aside.

Then he started climbing.

He knew, from his very first step, that he was going to be wading

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through decades, maybe centuries, of accumulated psychic detritus; he tried to brace himself for it, but he really didn't know how. Nothing he had ever done had prepared him for something like this.

A green rotting cheese roiled up his leg, and a rush of envy swept over him. *Roger* was safe up there, the smug bastard. . . .

He tore the envy away and took another step, and a rush of guilt flooded him — how could he think ill of Roger, who hadn't meant any harm?

He hesitated with that one, and tried an experiment. He reached down and tore off a few fragments — just little ones, like sickly gray-black cotton balls.

He hadn't been sure it was possible, but in fact it was easy; easier, he thought, than it should have been. He was sure he was doing something wrong here, that this was immoral somehow, but he forced himself.

He collected about a dozen pieces, then wadded them up and stuffed them in his pocket.

He knew he shouldn't be doing it; it was a really terrible idea. . . .

Then his hand came out of his pocket, and he smiled; the idea no longer troubled him at all.

"What are you doing there, Paul?" Roger called.

Paul had just tried to squeeze between two very large, nasty-looking things, and, in doing so, had run his leg right onto a hot red spike of anger. He snapped his head up and glared at Roger.

"What the hell does it *look* like I'm doing?" he bellowed. "Fat lot of help you are!"

He shook his leg free of the bad temper and took another step.

This was really very boring. Tiresome. Maybe he should just settle down somewhere and rest until it got more interesting. Climbing up the slope wasn't any fun. . . .

He waded on, through depression, ennui, anger, envy, guilt, shame, greed — and some surprises.

Lust, for one. That, he thought, was probably a relic of a more straitlaced era. It was all he could do to keep his hands out of his pants until he had scrambled up past it.

And pride. Sinful pride, a huge, seething mass of it. He wondered if whoever had dumped it had kept any; the sheer quantity was amazing.

Maybe it had grown since being dumped. Could it *do* that?

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Any number of questions piled into his mind, and he realized he'd stepped on a lump of curiosity. He kicked it aside, and lost his balance. He put out an arm to catch himself.

And mindless panic swept over him, abject terror. He froze.

He was near the top, but suddenly he was scared to go any farther.

"Paul?"

He looked up, and Roger's face was there, hanging above him like some looming horror about to pounce. The dirt was soft and crumbling beneath him. At any moment, he knew he would plummet back down the slope; he would break his neck against one of those trees at the bottom; he'd slash himself on the thorns and lie there bleeding and crippled — and Roger would just laugh; Roger had planned it all, the whole thing; he'd put Suze up to it; her depression wasn't real at all.

They were all in it.

He started to take a step back down the slope, away from his enemy up there, that monster that had pretended to be a friend, that had lured him into this trap.

Monster — that was it. Roger wasn't human at all. He was some kind of demon. He'd planned it all; he'd probably created the spirit dump in the first place just to trap people. He lured his prey out here with his phony cures, then trapped them in the dump where he could torture them, where he could suck out their souls, where he could blind them with thorns and let flies drink the blood and. . . .

If he stepped back, that might be what the fiend wanted. There could be barbed metal spikes there, spring-loaded spears that would thrust up into his belly, his groin. They'd missed him the first time, but now the Roger-thing was trying to drive him back to where the traps, the other monsters, were waiting. Little things with teeth and claws and shining bright eyes — he could almost see them, behind him, on either side, everywhere.

He didn't dare move.

But he didn't dare stay where he was, either. He began trembling, not merely with fear, but as he struggled with himself over what to do.

He knew he could never defeat the monsters — not just the Roger-thing, but all the others that must be lurking up there out of sight, that had been hiding in among the trees. But maybe he could at least try; maybe somebody would hear his screams as he tried to escape and they

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brought him down, fangs and claws and sharp steel blades gleaming.

He lunged forward, and the fear lost its grip. He sprawled on the slope, his hand reaching the grass at the top of the cliff, his face falling smack into the hangover that someone had thrown down just moments earlier. The world spun; his head throbbed; Roger's shuffling footsteps were like huge grating sandpaper sounds, like fingernails on a blackboard, but at least he wasn't terrified anymore.

Just nauseated.

Then someone had hold of his arm, and he was being pulled up, and he reluctantly managed to get his feet under him and clamber up the last few feet onto the meadow. The hangover came with him, and he blinked owlishly at his rescuers. The light hurt his eyes.

"Are you all right?" someone asked. He winced.

"Don't shout," he whispered.

Someone giggled. "I think he got my hangover," he said.

Paul nodded, then winced again as the movement made his headache worse. When the others released his arms, he sank down to sit cross-legged on the grass, where he gradually managed to pry the hangover, bit by bit, out of his head and gut.

When he finally flung it back over the side, it was as if the sun had burst through storm clouds, and he took a deep, gasping breath in relief.

Then he sat for a moment, gathering his thoughts, as the others all huddled about him. He stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out a little wad of guilt.

He felt bad about what he was about to do — but he told himself that was just the guilt; he didn't let it stop him.

"Give me a hand," he said, reaching out.

Two people took his hands, one on each side, to help him up; when he was upright, he made sure to leave a little bit of guilt with each of them.

A little guilt never hurt anybody.

"Roger," he said, after quickly dipping his hand back in his pocket, "thanks for pulling me up." He reached out to shake hands.

Roger, a bit reluctantly, shook, and took a little guilt away with him.

Two others were clapped on the back.

The last of the group he didn't bother with; the poor woman looked guilty enough already. And he still had a fair-sized lump in his pocket that would come in handy when he talked to Suze on Monday and asked her

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to stop broadcasting about the place. He wasn't sure how he would store it that long, but he was sure he could manage it.

"Bet you're glad to be out of there," someone said. "I'm really sorry if we caused you trouble."

"It's nothing," Paul said. "Really."

"Yeah, well," Roger said, "*I* wouldn't want to go down there! We could see your face — it looked awful."

"It wasn't so bad," Paul insisted.

"I'll bet you wouldn't want to do it again!"

"Oh, I don't know," Paul said, looking back, remembering lust, and pride, and the wad of guilt, and thinking of Angie's good old Uncle Bert. "People throw away the damnedest things."

"Good news, Ed! My troubles have melted like lemon drops and I'm way above the chimney tops!"

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Nancy Springer has written both adult and children's books for Pocket, TOR, Harper & Row, and Arbor House/Morrow. Her most recent is The Friendship Song *which Atheneum published in March. "Where I learned to wish on a white horse, I don't remember," she writes. "It's just another childhood superstition, but this one resonates for me because there is a touch of Cinderella in it, a faint echo of 'Someday My Prince Will Come.' Or perhaps it is because people have always perceived something supernatural about white horses."*

Don't Look Back

By Nancy Springer

TO WISH ON a white horse, you don't look back. When you see a white horse, you lick your left thumb, sock your left fist into your right hand, wish (silently, secretly, and don't ever tell anybody, or the wish won't come true), turn away from where the horse is giving you a gaze unreadable as fate, and DON'T LOOK BACK.

In Pennsylvania Dutch country, all good things were abundant, including horses, many of which were white. Growing up in the hilly farmlands on the York County side of the Susquehanna, Amy Shaffer had plenty of chance to practice her wishing skills on long summer evenings as she biked with her best friend, Keith Bupp.

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"You're gonna wreck," he would complain at her as she took both hands off her handlebars to wish.

"Am not. First thing I wish is not to wreck."

"You're nuts, you know that? I bet you never get anything you wish for."

She had wished for a pony, her own phone, and a fashion-fur jacket and had never gotten them. However, she considered that the jury was not yet in. She had wished for a portable radio and had actually received one for her birthday.

They crested a hill and stopped to breathe. Her chest ached from the long, laboring upslope, and, in the late-day light, the view was so beautiful it made her blink. Far down the pasture bottom, she saw a horse grazing, too distant for her to tell much about it except the color, which was white. Amy was eleven years old, and the horse shone snowy as a movie star's teeth, and all things seemed possible. Quickly she licked her thumb, smacked her fist, and wished it would always be hilltops for her and no valleys, that she would always be happy.

"You just wished on a mule," Keith told her as they pedaled away.

She snapped her head around before she remembered the rules, then wailed at Keith, "You made me look back!"

"So what? You know what happens if you wish on a mule? You get the opposite of what you wish for."

"That's not true!" Or was it? He was such a tease, she could never tell if he was serious about anything.

"Is too."

Sulkily, she said, "It's not a mule."

"It is so. That's an Amish farm. Amish don't have white horses, dummy. That's gotta be an ugly old gray mule."

Amy was almost twelve; what lay ahead of her loomed like a precipice, and without a white horse to wish on, all things seemed ruined. She said to Keith, "I hate you," turned her bike around, and headed back as fast as she could pedal.

He caught up to her (which made her angrier) and puffed along by her side. "Hey! What you so mad about?"

"You!" She passed judgment. "You don't understand *anything*." If only she could leave him behind, she would not look back; she would never care about what happened to him. But she couldn't pull away from him no

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matter how she tried, all the way home.

Time passed. Amy grew tall, stopped wishing on white horses. She seldom rode her bike, looking forward to her driver's license instead. Her freshman year in high school, she permed her hair, had trouble in algebra, giggled with girlfriends. Her sophomore year, she listened nightly to the dedication hour on the radio, breaking her heart over a boy named Chip Bender. Keith lettered in basketball, played trumpet in the band, walked Amy home sometimes, hung around her house sometimes on Sunday afternoons. Once in a while, they met each other in the mall to see a movie. Her senior year, he was her prom date, though she was wishing all the time that a football-hero heartthrob named Russ Neff had asked her.

York County seemed small and stupefying to her after graduation. She worked in the sales office at Pfaltzgraff and on summer weekends went to family reunions in picnic-grove pavilions where the bugs bit, where the chicken-corn soup tasted provincial to her, the potpie bland and fattening. Keith had gone into the Air Force and was seeing the world; she hated him. She wanted — she didn't know what she wanted. But something, someone. A prince on a white horse, maybe, to come and take her away. To gallop her off to a palace of Happily Ever After, a castle of Big Things Happening somewhere far from poky back roads and red-beet eggs.

Why wait? she decided. She would go away to the hot flatlands of California, where there were no deep, shadowy river valleys and steep upslopes to slow anyone down, where people ate spicy food and lived in the fast lane. She would take the reins in her own hands, make her own life, maybe be discovered, maybe be a star. All she needed was just to save some traveling money, and then —

Then Keith was back, saying, "Amy," saying, "God, it's good to be home. Amy, you don't know. There's no place like this on earth." Saying, "I want to marry you, Amy," and for once she could tell he was serious.

She wailed at him, "Keith, you might have mentioned something about it before!"

"It didn't seem like the sort of thing to put in a letter."

"You hardly ever wrote me anyway!"

"Well, that's why."

"Did you think I was just going to sit here and wait for you? I've got plans! Places to go."

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"What about us?"

"What about me?"

Within a few days, Amy was on a plane for California.

Two years later she was back. California had turned out to have its toiling upslopes after all, and many of the people she met had been the equivalent of gray mules. Also, there were other considerations.

On a long summer evening, she and Keith drove across the rolling York County countryside together, through crest and hollow and hilltop view, so that he could show her an old stone farmhouse he had found.

"So why'd you come back?" he teased. He already knew, but he had to tease.

"Guess."

"Because I wrote."

"Nope."

"Because I got down on my knees and begged you."

"When did you do that?"

"Did I forget to do that? I thought I did that. Well, why did you come back, then?"

"I love you."

"Naw, that couldn't be it. I know. Patrick Swayze broke your heart. You need my shoulder to cry on."

The house nestled on a hillside. Long vacant, it would take a lifetime of work to make it all it could be. But it looked out over pasture and woodlot and the wide, shining Susquehanna, and, in the nearest hollow, a white horse grazed.

Home. There was nowhere else like it on earth. Amy said, "Oh Keith, this is the place."

"I thought so."

White as her wedding dress would be, the horse lifted its wise old steady-eyed head and looked at her. Amy licked her left thumb, smacked her left fist into her right hand, and wished with all her might that, hills and valleys, good times and bad, she and Keith would be with each other forever.

He saw what she was doing, and by his smile she knew he understood. Most things he understood well enough. He told her, "Don't look back!"

She promised, "I never will."

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"A Dying Breed" is Carrie Richerson's first professional short story sale. Since she sold the story to us last summer, she has sold us another, and made a sale to Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine. *She lives near Austin, Texas, with her partner and twelve cats. The story came about after Carrie had read a number of horror anthologies dealing with the living dead. "I felt I was missing something," she writes. "The dead are a different species from the living, more alien than anything that could come from the stars, separated from us by an experience no living person can share. We preserve them like treasures, hoard their bodies away in caskets and vaults, but our deepest terrors concern their return and what they might demand of us. For the natural order to be suspended, for the dead to rise and walk again among the living, would require a motivation stronger than the mere communion of flesh or the intimacy of sex. What necessity could be powerful enough to open those graves and vaults, and at what cost to the living!"*

A Dying Breed

By Carrie Richerson

I CAN LIVE with ghosts. This part of the Texas Hill Country has ghosts thicker than fleas on an ol' yaller dog. Conquistadores slaughtered for God and gold here; the Comanche returned the favor. Tonkawa practiced their ritual cannibalism along these creeks; Anglos answered with their own atrocities. To the south the martyrs of the Alamo mission still haunt old San Antonio de Bexar. After the unpleasantness between the northern and southern states, freed blacks moved here from Dixie and farmed the river bottoms in the only cash crop they knew — cotton — until they and the land wore out. The attentive midnight ear hears war whoops and Rebel yells mingle with the strains of old spirituals.

The ghosts carry their histories upon their bowed backs and ask nothing of the living. I can live with them in peace. But the dead have never rested easy in this sun-drenched, heat-struck land — and nowadays

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they don't seem to be resting at all. . . .

Angelina and I had been going over the week's arrest stats, in preparation for my appearance the next day before the board of county commissioners. Fewer people reside in our entire county than in some of San Antonio's suburbs, but that doesn't mean we don't have a problem with crime. Vandalism and driving-while-intoxicated arrests were way up over last year, and drugs were starting to be a serious concern. Domestic-disturbance calls were on the rise, too. Everyone seemed to be on a short fuse. Just the previous month, a local businessman had engaged in an old-fashioned shoot-out on the main street of the county seat with his wife's lover. Both were lousy shots and managed only to inflict painful but non–life-threatening wounds, despite firing off a total of fifteen rounds between them. It was a miracle that someone wasn't killed.

A miracle that my department had nothing to do with, since none of us were anywhere around at the time. It is simply not possible to give adequate law-enforcement coverage to an entire county with only four people and one working patrol car. I would take the arrest stats and an impassioned plea for more money to the commissioners' court the next day, but it wouldn't do any good. I already knew what I would hear: times are tough for everyone, tax rate too high already, no extra money in the budget. The same excuses I'd heard for the past three years.

Angelina and I were crammed into the microscopic cubicle that functions as my office; the only way we could both fit on the same side of the desk to review the booking log was for Angelina to kneel on top. That blocked my view of the door, so I didn't see our visitor enter. The first I knew of something wrong was Kyle's voice going up in that stuttering squeak he does when he gets excited or angry.

That sound has set my teeth on edge since Kyle was a baby nursing at my breast. I suppose it always will. But this time he was alternating it with some sort of gagging moan. It sounded serious, but imagination failed me. It couldn't be an escape; we had only one prisoner, a DWI still sleeping it off. Besides, the *only* thing the county commissioners had agreed to spend good money on was a set of primo locks for our two cells. My fifty-year-old joints could scream at me tomorrow. I threw myself over the desk and out of the cubicle.

I didn't draw my gun. Experience has taught me to be wary of such a

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facile solution to problems. It's a good thing, too: the temptation to put a bullet into the thing standing just inside the front door was overwhelming. The part of me that said, "Shoot!" shoved up hard against the part that said, "Run!" — and both were immobilized by the part that said, "Pray."

My mind refused to accept the sight of the decomposed body standing before me, but the smell was another matter. It was god-awful — that vicious, rotten tang that even a novice can't mistake. Kyle's noises had changed to the sound of vomiting. I didn't blame him, but I needed something I could deal with. "Kyle, stop that *right now!* Angelina, get out here and make Kyle clean up his mess!" Angie had managed to extricate herself from the tangle in my office. She edged up to the front desk, never taking her gun off our visitor, and bent over the retching Kyle. I heard a sharp slap, and a string of quiet Spanish profanity that would blister paint. Kyle shut up. Angie can keep him in line. Me, I'm only his mother.

This had to be a dream or some sort of horrid practical joke, and I must look just as silly as I felt. I tried to think of a reasonable response to an unreasonable situation. I opened my mouth, to say I don't know what, but the apparition beat me to it.

"Sheriff Webster." The sound was a dry whisper that went right to my knee joints and gnawed. The fleshless jaws moved a little, but I swear I don't know *how* it made sound: it had no lips, no tongue — no lungs, for God's sake. The vacant orbits regarded me blankly. Any minute, I thought, Angelina and Kyle are going to bolt and leave me here with this — *thing.* Hell, I might even go with them.

Instead, I found myself answering it. "I'm Sheriff Webster, yes." And, inanely: "How can I help you?"

Shreds of dry flesh rustled as the corpse made a faint motion — something that rang a familiar chord, but there was no time to follow the thought — with its hands. I felt like joining Kyle in his adoration of the floor tiles. The whisper came again. "Arrest the man who killed me."

This just *had* to be a dream. Or maybe one of those newfangled "Candid Camera" rip-offs. Hollywood special effects can do *anything* these days. I was probably exchanging pleasantries with latex and invisible wires. What could I do but play along? "Come in to my office and tell me about it."

As I passed the front desk, I leaned over to address my deputies. "Angelina, get your notepad. Kyle, get that mess cleaned up and get back on the radio. Both of you — if you so much as breathe a word of this to

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anybody, I will personally line you up against that wall and shoot you. Do you understand me?"

They nodded, wide-eyed. Angelina whispered, "Doris, is that thing for *real*?"

"I don't know, Angie. Now get a move on." She crossed herself, and Kyle looked ready to heave again. I fixed him with a glare that made him change his mind and turn back to the radio monitor.

I sat down behind my desk as the walking affront to gastric stability edged into the office and lowered itself gingerly into the other chair. That left no room in the office for Angelina; she took up station in the doorway behind the thing. She must have been thinking along the same lines I had been: I saw her wave her hand through the air above it, feeling for wires. Nothing.

If it *was* fake, it was a beautiful job. Adult male, exact age and race unknown (I can do some field forensics, but I'm not *that* good), in an advanced state of decomposition. All the internal organs were gone, but some stringy remnants of muscle and skin clung to the bones. Some black hair remaining on shreds of scalp. Dead several months, at least, but it would take a pathologist to tell exactly how long.

Multiple traumatic fractures of all the long bones, several broken ribs, palmar bones crushed. Probable cause of death: the entire left side of the skull was shattered. Dark emptiness yawned within. Buried without benefit of shroud or coffin, and recently exhumed: dirt dusted the parchment skin and filled the floors of the orbits, and a desiccated millipede was wound into one of the shoulder joints. I shivered. Entirely too realistic for my taste.

"Don't you recognize me, Sheriff?" There was a plaintive note to the dry rasp this time.

Recognize it? "I'm sorry, I don't." How could I put this? "There isn't, uh, much left of your face. Who are you?" This conversation was growing more unbelievable by the minute.

"I am — I *was* — Jesse Carmody, Mrs. Webster."

Oh my God. Suddenly I did believe, and with no more evidence than that — because no one, *no one* would have the supremely bad taste to make such a joke about Jesse. Certainly not to me.

Jesse had been my daughter's boyfriend throughout high school. They had met when Tamara had offered to tutor him in math in the ninth grade.

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Many a night I'd sat in my kitchen with this young man, drinking coffee and listening to his plans for the future. He was going to work hard, save his money, go to college, *make* something of himself. The recitation of those bright hopes for the future always drew to a close with Jesse and Tamara sharing promises of eternal loyalty, and those special smiles kids in love give one another — while I smiled a totally different kind into my coffee.

Some nights, Tamara still cried herself to sleep in my arms.

He'd been missing for six months now, and we had all just hoped he had run away to the city. That wasn't Jesse's style, but his father was a drinker with a hot temper and had admitted to having a yelling fight with the boy the night he disappeared. I'd never suspected Hector Carmody of harming Jesse, though; until now, there had never even been any reason to suspect foul play.

So Jesse was dead, and what sat before me was all that remained of his promise and his dreams. A great sadness filled me. And a great pity, too —for it must be lonely indeed to be dead, and rotted, and to walk again among the living. Impulsively, I reached out to touch his hand. The knuckles were cold and dry under my fingers. "I'm so sorry, Jesse. Who did this to you?"

He gave us the name: Robert Englethorpe, a local rancher. The quiet, pleasant, loner type that no one ever suspects of wickedness — until it's too late. I swore. The son of a bitch was a deacon in my church.

Jesse waited for me to fish out a tape for our decrepit recorder, then gave us the details. He'd gone for a long walk after the fight with his dad. Englethorpe had passed him on the road, then turned around to offer him a ride. When Jesse told him of the fight, Englethorpe offered to let the boy stay at his ranch until Jesse's dad had cooled down. Jesse had accepted the offer of help from a neighbor without hesitation.

The specifics of torture and violation were even more chilling when recited in that passionless whisper. Angelina wept silently over her notepad. She had never served on a big-city police force, had never had her nose rubbed in this sort of sickness, as I had. I had left Houston when I couldn't stand it anymore, and moved to a sleepy country town. But no place is immune, and a sleepy surface can simply camouflage the virulence underneath. I felt very old, very tired, listening to Jesse.

In the end, Englethorpe had beaten his victim to death with an ax

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handle, then sodomized him with the same instrument. Somehow it made it worse that Jesse knew every degradation Englethorpe had inflicted on his body, even after his death. "He hurt me so bad, Mrs. Webster, I was grateful when he finally killed me." How could a mere whisper convey that much pain?

I had to know. "Jesse, how is it that you are here?"

He seemed to struggle for words. "A dispensation, they said. For a little time, they said. For justice." The way he said the word *justice* made my neck hair stand up.

"Who said, Jesse?"

He made a confused gesture. Something he couldn't answer? Or wouldn't? Maybe I really didn't want to know.

My bottom desk drawer was the only one with a lock. It was the safest place I could think of to store such a bizarre and momentous tape recording. When I opened the drawer, a half-full bottle of rye rolled with a clunk from one side to the other. I have never craved a drink so intensely as I did at that moment. My hand was shaking as I closed the drawer, but I don't think Angelina saw. I refuse to speculate upon what the former Jesse Carmody might have seen.

It was my call to make. It didn't take me long to make my decision. I could spend the rest of the afternoon tracking down the county judge and trying to convince him I had enough probable cause for a search warrant for Englethorpe's ranch. Or I could go get the bastard right then. This crime's aftermath was too bizarre to keep it a secret for long, and if Englethorpe heard a rumor of Jesse's reappearance, he'd bolt. Maybe later I could make a case for hot pursuit.

Angelina loaded the heavy artillery while Kyle called George, out patrolling in our one official vehicle, and told him where to meet us. But not why. Broadcasting that over the police band would be like issuing an invitation. I told Jesse I wanted him to wait for us at the station, and that I was going to lock the front door. "I really don't think anyone else should see you yet. I hope you understand."

He nodded. "My parents?"

My stomach twisted. "It's not going to be easy on them, but I know they'll want to talk to you." Oh God, what would I tell Tamara?

Our DWI was still snoring. Just before I went out the door, Jesse cocked that broken skull as if listening to something I couldn't hear, then

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spoke. "There are others. They will be waiting for you." A chill chased me out of the station.

The three of us crowded into my pickup. Kyle folded himself onto the floorboard; Angelina and I tried our best to look nonchalant as I drove slowly out of town. The ambulance chasers must have been engaged elsewhere; no one followed us. George caught up with us as we turned onto the unpaved county road that ended at Englethorpe's place. I stopped for a moment to let Angelina transfer to the patrol car so she could explain things to George. I hoped he would believe her; I expected to have a hard enough time just managing Kyle.

We pulled to a stop at Englethorpe's gate and shut off the engines. I listened. The silence was broken only by the strident monotone of cicadas and the distant squawking of a scrub jay. To the northeast, creamy white clouds were bubbling up into a potential thunderhead. Our blistered land was desperate for rain; I felt like a traitor as I wished the storm away. It would make finding and preserving evidence more difficult.

Englethorpe's ranch looked unkempt, but the drought had had that effect on even the best-maintained spreads this year. The hayfield was unmowed, and the late-season feed corn unharvested. The lodged stalks rustled against one another in the occasional puff of air. It sounded like Jesse.

The house sat only a hundred feet from the gate; a barn and a loafing shed stood farther away from the road. The curtains on the house were drawn, and I couldn't see any lights inside. There was an old hulk up on blocks in the driveway, and a battered red pickup parked behind it. An ancient Farmall tractor was parked in the loafing shed. The gate in front of us was closed with a heavy chain and sturdy padlock.

The red pickup matched the description Jesse had given us. I wondered if Englethorpe had heard us arrive, if he was watching from behind one of the curtains. I wondered if he would surrender peaceably, or if someone would get hurt. I wondered if I was doing the right thing

George fetched bolt cutters from the trunk of the patrol car and applied them to the chain. Angie caught the cut ends and eased them to the ground. The hinges bleated mournfully as George pushed the gate open just enough for the four of us to slip through. George and I took the two shotguns; Angie and Kyle drew their revolvers. Some instinct told me the house was vacant. I didn't want to waste time on it, but I didn't dare

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skip checking it out. I waved George and Angelina around to the back. Just as I started up the steps, someone spoke behind me. "He is not in the house." The sibilant whisper was familiar by now. I slapped a hand over Kyle's mouth to keep him from screaming, and turned around.

There were three of them, of various sexes, ages, and states of disrepair. As I watched, a fourth came striding slowly out of the cornfield. The cornfield. Of course.

My glare told Kyle he could join the ranks of the freshly dead if he squealed. I sent him around back to fetch George and Angelina. He could get his vomiting over with, *quietly*, before he returned. He was white to the gills, but he managed to keep it under control until he was out of sight.

The three of them caught up with me and my entourage of the dead a few yards into the cornfield. Dry stalks had been uprooted and tossed aside to form a small clearing, invisible from the edge of the plot. The dead and the living clumped at separate sides of the clearing. Perhaps the deceased regarded us with the same wonder, revulsion, and lack of understanding we felt for them. George was almost as white as Kyle. He must not have believed Angelina after all, but he held his ground like a Spartan when the crude grave at my feet began to open.

First a fissure spread along its center, as though an invisible hand had scooped a trough through the clods. Grains at the edge of the crack tumbled inside, then suddenly began to leap out again as the dirt started to flow and ripple away from the centerline. The five open trenches beside it were outlined with standing waves that looked like the result of the same process. The body that rose up from that hole, dirt cascading from its shoulders, was very fresh — and very young.

At first, I thought he was still alive. Then I saw the marks on his body, and he turned his ruined eyes toward me. I knelt so he wouldn't have to stare upward. Maybe it made a difference.

"Hello, son. What's your name?"

"Jeffrey. Jeffrey Thornton." Missing-persons bulletin out of San Antonio, two days ago. "Are you a policewoman?"

"A kind of policewoman, Jeffrey. I'm a sheriff, and these are my deputies." He didn't react to the dead bodies standing about. "Do you know how you got here?"

"I was at the store with my mama. A man made me get into his car. He brought me here. He did things that hurt me." A thoughtful pause. "I'm

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dead now. Your face is wet."

"I know. I'll be O.K. in a minute." A dead little boy who missed his mama. I hugged him, very gently. "Do you know where this man is now?"

He turned and pointed. "He's in the barn. He has a lady in there now."

Oh Christ.

We stormed the barn like an assault team. I pumped two shotgun loads into the door at bar level, and George and Kyle threw an old feed trough through what was left of it. We hurtled inside — and were just moments too late.

I don't know . . . Maybe if I'd believed sooner, or had spent less time deposing Jesse, or less time comforting Jeffrey, or . . . . I've spent every night since then second-guessing myself, and I'll take my guilt to my grave. Along with the vision of Hell that Robert Englethorpe had created in that barn.

He leaped off her as we burst in. He must have slashed her throat just as he climaxed. I knew we were going to lose her when I saw how her head lolled on her neck; he'd damn near cut all the way through to the spine. But she was still conscious, for a last few seconds, and the look in her eyes as she struggled to scream past the blood and the froth. . . . .

Angelina headed for the victim; the rest of us bracketed Englethorpe. He was babbling, scrambling back into the shadows, trying to yank up his pants with one hand and waving that great bloody knife at us with the other. We were all yelling at him to drop it, but I'm sure he couldn't even understand what we were saying. Any moment, someone was going to blow him away, and I didn't want that. No, not that.

Then little Jeffrey Thornton walked into the middle of the chaos, and Englethorpe just went to pieces. He threw the knife away, dropped to his knees, and crawled to my feet, crying and begging us to protect him. I wanted to kick him in the face. I turned away in disgust.

To see Kyle raise his service revolver and pull back the hammer. The click echoed like a gong in the suddenly silent barn.

NIGHT. A street sweating with fog and fear. A body lies sprawled in the dim circle of light from a corner streetlamp. One arm is outflung; the hand lies in shadow. Something dark seeps from the chest to add to the stains of old sins on the sidewalk.

A young, uniformed police officer edges toward the body. Her weapon

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is fixed upon the still figure, but her hands are shaking. The revolver's barrel is hot; it fumes faintly in the wet air.

Question: How many guns can you count in this picture?

Answer: Every shooting, no matter how justified, has two victims.

I blinked my way back to the choking stink of blood and fear-sweat and semen in the barn. In an instant, it would be joined by the reek of burnt powder. We *all* wanted Englethorpe dead, but I couldn't let Kyle destroy himself like that. Angie was gathering herself to jump him. I waved her off as a horrible inspiration struck.

"Kyle, how would you like *him* to rise from the dead to accuse *you* of murder?"

For a long moment, nothing changed. Then a tremor started in Kyle's hand and moved up his arm until his whole body vibrated. I reached for the gun, lowered the hammer, and took it away from him. Tears — shame? rage? — spilled down his cheeks. For the first time in far too long, I felt tenderness rather than exasperation. Surely he deserved at least as much of my compassion as I had been handling out to dead folks lately. I thought about Jeffrey Thornton, and his mother, and hugged my son fiercely.

I sent him back to the front gate to fetch the patrol car. He would have to walk the gauntlet of the dead, but it was better than being in that barn. I helped George handcuff Englethorpe and shackle him to the stanchion of a hayrick. Then I forced myself to cross the bloody straw to where Angelina knelt by Englethrope's last victim.

The woman was dead; nothing Angie could have done would have saved her. It did occur to me to wonder if, or how long, she would stay dead. We searched through the clothing scattered about, but didn't find anything to identify her. We did find a number of implements that Englethorpe had used on her.

There were hours and hours of depressing, tedious details to complete after that. Angelina and George began identifying and interviewing the risen victims while I made some calls. San Antonio loaned us a portable crime lab and some investigators, and the FBI got into the act. Every last one of them had to have the fact of walking, talking dead people proved over and over again. And every last one of them freaked, in his or her own

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fashion, when confronted with the reality. One FBI asshole wanted to grab one of the dead and ship him off for an immediate autopsy. I managed to dissuade him, but I wondered how we would handle that later. A pathologist's report would be needed for Englethorpe's trial.

As soon as I could, I sent Kyle back to the station. We had left a jailed prisoner unattended far too long, and I wanted to know what Jesse was doing. Kyle was getting better at handling the new order of things. His voice was steady when he radioed that everything at the station was under control. Jesse was sitting in my office, waiting for no one knew what. Soon the world would have to know about his existence, and that of the other animated corpses we were working around at Englethorpe's ranch. The local and San Antonio press had sniffed something afoot from the amount of radio traffic. George was having to beat them off the crime scene with a stick.

The heavens withheld their mercy from the thirsty land. The storm clouds evaporated and blew away in ragged, dark shreds. We worked on through the one-hundred-degree heat of the afternoon, while squadrons of confused buzzards circled overhead. Dozens of feet stomped the caliche soil into white dust that floated into the air, coated our clothes and contaminated our samples, gritted in our eyes, and left us all sneezing furiously. When I finally gave up, turned everything over to Angelina and George, and went back to the station, I caught hell from one of the county commissioners who had been trying to call me all day.

It was time to break the news. I managed to persuade him to call the other commissioners together for an emergency meeting at the station. It was quite a scene. Jesse was patient, whispery, and indubitably there. The only one who handled it well was the young mother of three who had won the last election by a fluke. Two of the good ol' boys fainted, and a third had chest pains. We had to call the EMS in, so of course they got to see Jesse, too. The news was going to be all over the county in an eye blink. I had to call Jesse's parents before they heard about it through the grapevine. I called Tamara while I was at it.

There was no way we could guarantee Englethorpe's safety in our little jail. We transferred him to a high-security lockup down in San Antonio. The county commissioners had recovered: they were already arguing about the cost of jailing him and of a heavy-duty murder trial.

* * *

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The flak fell pretty heavily on our county at first: screaming tabloid headlines, condescending reports in the national media of a mass hallucination in a Texas backwater, patronizing analyses by hoards of "experts." But within days, more of the dead were appearing in other towns and large cities. Soon it was happening all over the world.

Why now? Why in my jurisdiction? What made this little Texas county so special? These questions get lost in the larger mystery. Perhaps some threshold of mayhem was finally reached, and whoever runs the cosmos decided to teach us a lesson. Or perhaps it is our own collective conscience that has brought our sins back to confront us.

Perhaps the restless dead have been with us for a long time, bony fingers plucking at our sleeves, pleading for our attention, a hearing, *justice*. Maybe we were just willfully blind and deaf, until now. But everyone deserves to be listened to, even if he is dead. Maybe especially if he is dead. On a blistering August day, Kyle, Angie, George, and I listened, and the world tilted into a new orbit.

And still it continues. Everywhere the dead make their slow, deliberate, terrifying ways to the local constabulary, to demand justice. Coffins exhume themselves; vaults and crypts spring open. The cremated are reconstituted as swirling clouds of gray ash and blackened bone. The remains display a tremendous physical integrity. In Atlanta a religious zealot, convinced that the risen dead were instruments of Satan, broke through a police cordon and hacked one apart with an ax. It reassembled its scattered limbs while the police cuffed the attacker (who was charged with abuse of a corpse).

At first, it was only victims of intentional murder whose killers were still alive and had never been charged or tried. Victims of crimes of passion, of rage, of lust, of greed. Victims of gang wars, of lynchings, of gay-bashings, of domestic violence. Victims of twisted schemes and twisted desires. Victims of terrorism by the planeload. Victims who could not possibly know the identity of their assailants rose with names, addresses, present locations, physical descriptions. There is never any explanation of the source of the information.

Once their stories are told, they wait, impassive and implacable, in whatever hastily arranged quarters have been found for them, as a confounded legal system attempts to cope. They will not go away, not without the justice they demand. They will not waive charges or plea-

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bargain. Considering how slowly that legal machinery turns, some of them may be with us for years.

I hear a lot of places overseas — Kampuchea, Armenia, Argentina —are in chaos. In this country, California's infamous Zodiac killer was finally identified; what a surprise *that* one turned out to be. And the body count was higher than any of the official estimates. Here in Texas, Henry Lee Lucas's toll turned out to be much lower than what he had boasted of, and lots higher than what he had confessed to. He was never tried for most of those murders, you know. When he heard that a delegation of his victims had shown up to visit him, he found a way to kill himself in his maximum-security cell. After that the authorities had to put a suicide watch on a number of prisoners. But of course there are never enough guards to go around.

We know no more about the nature of death, or of afterdeath, than we did before they arrived. Scientists cannot explain the phenomenon, despite imaginative experiments and the stolid cooperation of their subjects. The dead do not change while they are among us; decomposition does not progress. They neither eat nor drink nor excrete. They do not sleep or chat. They never laugh. Perhaps they love. Do they envy the living? I don't know.

There have been riots, panics, demonstrations. And thousands of suicides. Some, the secret murderers among us, whose hidden crimes have now been exposed in the most literal fashion; but most, ordinary people who cannot bear what has happened to their loved ones. Mothers and fathers of murdered children, spouses, and lovers. The funeral industry is having a banner year.

We are trying to live with the dead, and it is killing us. How is that for *justice*?

Jesse Carmody's mother is one who couldn't take it. She tried to kill herself with some Compound 1080 her husband had bought to poison coyotes; she's still in a psychiatric hospital down in San Antonio. Jesse's father is a changed, sobered man. he invited Jesse to stay at the house while they waited for Englethorpe's trial. Someday maybe I'll have the courage to ask Hector Carmody what they talked about.

But Tamara, dear daughter, has set an example for us all. When she

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saw Jesse that first night, she marched right up to him, put her arms around him, and kissed his cold, bare cheek. Now she has become a lay visitor for our church, accompanying the minister to counsel those whose faith has been sorely tested by this development.

For everyone who breaks, there is one who grows stronger. Kyle has been like the Rock of Gibraltar since that day. He and Angelina are going to be married this fall; they have enough faith in the future to plan to have kids.

I'm pretty proud of both my children.

We shipped the body of Englethorpe's last victim down to the medical examiner in San Antonio for autopsy, and circulated pictures throughout the States and Mexico. No one claimed the body. When the M.E. got tired of her taking up drawer space, he insisted we take her back. The county commissioners didn't want to spring for the cost of burying her, until I got ugly. She stayed in the ground for a while, then rose in time for the trial. We got an ID, and contacted her relatives. *Then* the commissioners complained that they had wasted the money for the burial!

Englethorpe's trial was less of a circus than I had expected. I don't know why he didn't plead guilty; the evidence against him was overwhelming. Maybe he really was insane, as his defense attorney claimed. That attorney was good, trying every trick in the book — and making up a few new ones — to cope with the unprecedented appearance of the alleged deceased victims to give testimony. He challenged that they weren't really dead (dead people don't walk and talk), that the dead couldn't be sworn because they weren't legally persons anymore, that their presence was too inflammatory.... You get the picture. The trial judge just decided to go with his instincts and to let the appeals courts take the heat.

I was one of the first prosecution witnesses to testify. Afterward I was allowed to sit in the courtroom and watch the rest of the show. I pitied Englethorpe. Not for his guilt — his deeds were monstrous and unpardonable — but for his fear. He was terrified of his victims, even though not one of them ever raised a finger — bony, gristly, or rot-bloated — against him. The pressure of their awful, vacant vision sent him into screaming hysterics. He had to be tranquilized or removed from the courtroom every day. The authorities put a double suicide watch on him throughout the trial.

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When little Jeffrey Thornton took the stand and swore, "So help me God," the whole courtroom sighed. The verdict, never in doubt, was handed down: guilty of capital murder. The sentence was also never in doubt: death by lethal injection.

The trial and sentence seemed to satisfy the requirements of the dead. They didn't wait around for the years of appeals. The victims made some final farewells, then they lay down and became what they had always been — dead. And this time, gone forever. We hope.

We are an adaptable species. The world is slowly returning to normal — a new normality, where the living rub shoulders with the dead as though they had always been among us. But there has been one major —and, I hope, permanent — change: there are, for obvious reasons, very few murders these days. . . .

The other day I drove out to Englethorpe's ranch again. There was a large "For Sale" sign on the gate, but I doubt the place will sell. The real estate market is in the doldrums now; there are abandoned ranches like Englethorpe's all over the county.

A dutiful realtor had shuttered and locked the house. The vehicles and farm equipment had all been sold at auction, for pittances. There wasn't much left of the cornfield. The investigators had torn it apart looking for more bodies. I completed the job the wind and sun had started on the police seal on the barn door, and went inside.

The ghosts muttered and fussed in the shadows, but I'll take them over the risen dead any day. No one had bothered to clean up. The straw around Englethorpe's "workbench" was black and tarry-looking in the dim light. It looked just as it had on that hot summer day so long ago. A little dustier, perhaps. Older and tireder for sure. Just like me.

I didn't bother to replace the seal on the door when I left.

I'm sitting in my study, working my way through a bottle of middlin' earnest rye and scribbling in my journal. The drought has broken at last; the sound of the rain is sweet. I wonder if the dead can appreciate it?

We will have to modify that old saw about death and taxes.

As a species aware of its own mortality, we have always hated and feared death, but it has also been a comfort to us. It offered the promise of resolution, of an end to striving; a way to wipe the slate clean, put down

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the chalk, and stop trying to solve the unsolvable problem — forever.

We didn't know how much we would miss death, until it was taken away from us.

In all my long career in law enforcement, I have had to use deadly force only once. I have always had regrets, of course; but I thought then, and still think now, that the shooting was justified — and so did my superiors. But what if the cosmic authorities do not share that view?

Last week, in California, an accident victim rose from the dead to accuse someone of negligence. In New York today, a suicide rose to accuse her mother of indifference. The dead seem to be growing more restive, less tolerant of the excuses made by the living.

I do not think that I could face the boy whose life I took.

So the level in the bottle declines, and I contemplate my service revolver, gleaming bluely in the pool of lamplight. I am tempted, very tempted, to take the coward's way out.

But what if I don't stay dead?

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We move from the land of the dead to a dead land. Terry Bisson, whose latest novel is the delightful Voyage to the Red Planet, *provides us with a bittersweet look at home.*

Canción Autentica de Old Earth

By Terry Bisson

"QUIETLY," OUR GUIDE said.

Quietly it was.

We glided over ancient asphalt, past ghost-gray buildings that glowed in the old, cold light of a ruined Moon that seemed (even though we have all seen it in pictures a thousand times) too bright, too close, too dead.

Our way was lighted by our photon shadow guide, enclosing us and the street around us in an egg of softer, newer light.

At the end of a narrow lane, four streets came together in a small plaza. At one end was a stone church, at the other a glass-and-brick department store facade, both dating (my studies coming through at last) from the High European.

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"There's no one here," one of us said.

"Listen . . .," said our guide.

There came a rumbling. A synthesizer on a rubber-tired wood-and-wire cart rolled into the plaza out of an alley beyond the department store. It was pulled by an old man in black sweaters, layered against the planet's chill, and a boy in a leather jacket.

An old woman, also all in black, and a smiling man who looked to be about forty walked behind. His smile was the smile of the blind.

"They still live here?" someone asked.

"Where else could they live?"

They stopped, and a small yellow dog jumped down from the cart. The old man opened the synthesizer's panels and connected its cables to a moldering fuel cell. Sparks flew. The boy took a dirty bundle from the cart and unwrapped a strat and a tambourine. He handed the tambourine to the blind man.

The old lady carried a black vinyl purse. She watched not them, but us; and I had the "feeling" she was trying to remember who we were.

The blind man was smiling past us, over us, as if at a larger crowd that had come into the plaza behind us. He was so convincing that I even "turned" to look. But of course the plaza was empty. The city was empty except for us and them; the planet was empty. It had been empty for a thousand years; empty while the seas fell and rose, then fell again; empty since the twist.

The old lady watched while our guide flowed out and narrowed in a crescent, arranging us in a half-circle around the musicians. Her face was as rough as the stones of the front of the church; her facade, as fallen-in.

Except for the boy's leather jacket, which was too shiny, everything they wore was old. Everything was cheap. Everything was black or gray.

The old man switched on the synthesizer and started to play chords in blocks of three. An electronic drumbeat kept time, a slow waltz. After a few bars, the boy came in on the strat, high, wailing tremolos.

"What about the singing?" someone complained in a whisper. "We came all the way across the Universe" — a slight exaggeration! — "for the singing."

"They used to sing for the tourists," our guide said. "Now there's only the occasional special group such as ours."

The blind man began to dance. With the dog at his feet, he waltzed

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around our little half-circle and then back, beating the tambourine first against the heel of one hand, and then against his hip. Where his feet brushed our photon shadow guide, his shoes sparkled and looked almost new.

As suddenly as he had started, he stopped, and the old man spoke in a shout:

"Hidalgos y damas estimadas —"

It was a variant of Latin that I could almost follow, Catalan or Spanish or Romany, perhaps. Looking over us (just as the blind man had), the old man welcomed us back to our ancient, our ancestral home, where we would always be welcome, no matter how far we strayed, no matter how many centuries we stayed away, no matter what form it pleased us to take, etc.

"Y ahora, una canción autentica de old Earth. . . ." He gave a nod to the boy, who played a blues figure high in the cutaway —

The blind man looked up to where a moon, *the* Moon, half-filled the sky; then he rose toward it on his tiptoes and opened his mouth, revealing blackened shards of teeth; and there was the singing we had come halfway across the universe to hear.

The little dog following him, the blind man walked as he sang—up, then down, our half-circle. It was quite beautiful. It sounded just as we had always imagined it might. His eyes were closed (now that he was singing), but the dog looked directly at us, one by one, from our "feet" upward, as if searching for something or someone. I could only partly follow the words, but as the song rose and fell, I knew he sang of the seas and of the cities, and of the centuries before the twist, when genetics locked our parents to a single planet and a single form. His song soared to a wail as he sang of the centuries after, and of the Universe that was ours at last. Listening, we huddled together inside our photon shadow guide; everything outside it, under that ruined Moon, even the little yellow dog, looked abandoned and lost.

"They are the last?" one of us whispered.

"According to them," our guide said, in its low tone, "there will be no more."

The song was over. The singer bowed until the echo had died away. When he straightened, and opened his eyes, they were filled like little seas.

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"The *canción autentica* is said to be a very sad song," said our guide.

The old lady stepped forward at last. She opened the purse, and someone produced a coin: the two met with a *clink* as if a long chain had just been closed. The dog followed in her footsteps as she walked around our half-circle, holding out the purse, and each of us put in the coin we had brought. I wished I had brought two. Though where would I have found another? God knows what she did with them anyway. There was no trade, no commerce, nothing left to buy.

"The *canción autentica* seemed very sad to me," someone said. I "nodded" in agreement. Certainly we can no longer sing, and it is said that since the twist, we no longer feel sadness, but what is hearing a thing if not feeling it? What is the difference? How else account for the desolate colors where our faces might once have been?

Closing the purse, the old woman returned to stand beside the cart. The blind man seemed ready to sing again, but the old man began closing the synthesizer, folding its panels in on themselves. The boy wrapped the strat, and then the tambourine, in the blanket. The photon shadow guide pulled in, gathering us into its egg of light, while the dog watched.

It was time to go.

When the others began moving, I hesitated at the edge of the department store's shadow, just out of the Moon's light. With his shining eyes, dead as moons, the singer stood watching us leave. It struck me that he hadn't come for the coins, but for something else; someone to sing for. Perhaps he wanted us to applaud, but of course that was impossible; perhaps he was still hoping we would all come home someday.

The old man and the boy began pulling the cart away. The old woman called to the blind man, and he turned and followed; the rumbling of the cart was all the guide he needed. The yellow dog stopped at the edge of the shadow, and turned, and looked back at me, as if he . . . as if I. . . . But the blind man whistled, and the dog, too, was gone, following the cart; and without further ado, I caught up with the others, and we left for our flyer, our starship, and our faraway home.

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Jack Williamson made his first appearance in F&SF in 1958. By then, he had already been publishing in the sf field for thirty years. Over thirty years later, he is still one of our premier authors. Tor has just published his forty-eighth novel, Beachhead. *We're pleased that he has returned to these pages with a strong sf story, "The Birds' Turn."*

The Birds' Turn

By Jack Williamson

THE SIBERIAN FLU had spread fast out of the northern latitudes, already the deadliest strain in history. Our chance to stop it lay with Hugo LeMoyne. I was a science writer then for the old *New York Times,* and had come to Atlanta to ask him.

He was to be a key speaker at a symposium on the viral diseases at the Centers for Disease Control. Hesitant when I phoned, he finally let me come up to his hotel room. A modest young redhead, he looked more like a college quarterback than a Johns Hopkins researcher, and he seemed oddly diffident when I asked if he had really developed the ultimate virus killer.

"Maybe so." He shrugged. "Maybe not."

Closemouthed at first, he relaxed as we talked. He had dodged other report-

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ers, he said, and admitted me only because he recognized my name. Warming to me, he confided that he was still jittery about his promised announcement.

"I'm just not sure." He got up to open his bag, found a bottle of corn whiskey, and poured two stiff shots before he spoke again. "What I've got — or think I've got — is a new angle on immunology. It looks good in the lab. It seemed to prove out in the initial animal tests, but I wanted more of them.

"I was counting on another month before the meeting. What I didn't expect was this Siberian epidemic and the way Cranley has pushed up the date in the hope he'd get a new way to fight it. I'm not ready to promise anything."

I begged for details. When I promised to keep them confidential, he gave me a preprint of his report. The flu viruses were parasitic DNA, he explained, clever enough to get into human host cells and trick them into breeding more parasitic DNA.

"Tricks call for tricks." Suddenly confident, he lifted his drink in boyish elation. "I've built a decoy. A target molecule, bioengineered from the viruses themselves. It offers binding sites to attract and capture them. Splits when it has eaten two of them, to make two new decoys."

"If it does prove out — " Awed, I raised my own glass to him. "A new age in medicine!"

"Don't print anything yet," he cautioned me. "Not till I hear what Nordman says."

"Nordman?" The name startled me. "Eric Nordman?"

"Our top virologist." He nodded. "He's trusted. His verdict can guarantee the human tests I need. Or kill me altogether."

He hesitated, frowning into his glass for half a minute before he decided to go on.

"I was a postdoc at his Albuquerque research center. Learned a lot from him, and admired him till we fell out over my interest in an antiviral agent. He turned his back on me. I never learned why." He looked back at me. "You know him?"

"I did, years ago."

He sipped his drink and waited.

"My best friend once." I sifted through the memories. "My roommate at Cal Tech. We did the Peace Corps together. Our wives were girls together in Texas, and we had a double wedding. Years since we've seen them, but we're getting together tonight, out at a place called Raventree. I'll give him your room number."

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"Thanks." He nodded absently, as if something bothered him. "We worked two years together, but I never understood him."

He wanted to pour another drink, but I had to meet Susan, who had spent the day shopping. She seemed exhausted when I found her, red-eyed and sneezing.

"Just the sniffles." Being Susan, she tried to make light of her discomfort. "A guinea pig, if your medical experts need me."

Reviving a little as we drove out of the city, she seemed as eager as I was to see Eric and Monica. The only real genius I had ever known, he had been a red-bearded giant with the drive of a modern Viking. We used to call him "Eric the Red." I thought I knew why LeMoyne found him hard to cope with. Stronger and sharper than nearly anybody else, he was sometimes arrogant. I'd loved him, envied him, sometimes hated him for the easy way he beat me at everything.

Susan had brought Monica to be his blind date when we stopped to see her in Texas on a drive West after graduation. An instant capture. He kept her in the car after they dropped us off, took her to bed in his motel, proposed at breakfast, and had her ready to join Susan and me in that double wedding when we got back from the Coast.

Out of school, the four of us had served together with the Peace Corps in Africa. Hopeless as the cause was, I recall those hard years with a kind of joy. We were young. Susan and Monica were beautiful and brave. Helping trapped people fight disease and desperation, I felt good about the effort, even after we all came home with malaria. My diaries made my first science book.

Eric, however, came back bitterly unhappy, because of course we had to leave disease unconquered, most of the overcrowded continent still mired in hopeless need. Not used to defeat, he quit the corps to do his own research. He and Monica dropped out of our lives. Reading his papers, I knew he had become a top authority on viral mutations, but the note from him had been a happy surprise.

Monica will be with me at Atlanta symposium. He scribbled it on a blank scrap of computer paper. *Can you and Susan come!* One more word in her neat hand: *Please!*

As delighted as I was, Susan got Monica on the phone that same night to set up our weekend together. Raventree Lodge was a fine old antebellum mansion, out toward the Blue Ridge from Atlanta, rebuilt into a small conference center. The symposium staff was gathering there to finalize the agenda.

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The manager gave me the fax from Eric when we checked in.

Sorry we can't be with you. The brief message perplexed and disappointed me. *Monica's heartbroken. Too bad this had to happen so soon.*

What was happening too soon? We had no clue. He had always been unpredictable, expecting me to understand him better than I ever could.

We canceled their reservation and followed our luggage up the magnificent stair. Our room at Raventree is burned into my mind. It was huge and high, floral paper time-stained and fading on the walls. The antique mahogany wardrobe smelled of slow decay, but the old black bellman chattered brightly about past guests as he opened the windows and showed us the view, trying valiantly to make us welcome.

Susan was crushed by the fax.

"Call New Mexico," she told me. "I'm afraid —"

She left the sentence unfinished and sat on the side of the bed while I dialed Eric's number. I got no answer. Trying to cheer her, I beckoned her to the big window. The view was really splendid, rolling hills already gold and scarlet with autumn and the far Blue Ridge hazily blue, but she was too sick by then to look.

I wanted to get a doctor, but she shook her head.

"Just these pesky sniffles." She managed a pale smile. "Get us a round of mint juleps. Classic Southern medicine. Granddad admitted they'd never cure a cold, but he said they kept you from caring."

The request surprised me, because she so seldom drank. She was shivering before the bellman came with the juleps. After a single sip of hers, she took a hot shower and crawled into the old four-poster. Breathing heavily, she seemed to be asleep. I sat across the room with my laptop, writing a summary of LeMoyne's preprint and framing questions about it for Marshall Cranley, who was to chair the symposium. When the phone rang, I hoped it might be Eric or Monica, but it was only a secretary.

"Dr. Vargas? Can you hold for Dr. Cranley?"

I said I'd hold.

"Bad news, Vargas." His voice was hoarse and harried and apologetic. "Nobody knows how bad, because Washington is trying to sit on the panic, but the symposium's dead. When LeMoyne heard Nordman couldn't come, he checked out and got a flight back to Baltimore. Without the two of them —"

I listened to a stifled coughing fit and asked what he knew about Eric.

"Just that he won't be here. I'd hoped he and LeMoyne could give us a han-

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dle on the epidemic. Now — I just don't know —"

Coughing again, he hung up.

I tried Eric's number again, and got a computer voice that said all channels were busy. When I looked at Susan, she was flushed and drenched with sweat. In spite of her protests, I tried to call a doctor. All I got were beeps.

"Love you, Ben." She sat bolt upright in bed, staring at me strangely before she smiled. "Dreamed about you."

She said she wasn't hungry. I brought her a glass of water, and she went back to sleep. The restaurant was closed, but I found snack crackers in a vending machine. Alarmed by then, I tried the TV, and found no comfort.

The suddenness of it stunned me. We had always ignored what we didn't want to see, and nobody was prepared. I got nothing but stale commercials and bits of taped sitcoms and the last of an incomprehensible special bulletin. Before midnight the set and the room lights flickered out. The phone was dead. All I could do was sit with Susan in the dark.

A long night. Too anxious to sleep, I walked the floor and tried the dead phone and sat holding her hot hand. Sometimes she gripped my fingers or mumbled in her sleep. Once, I heard angry cursing and running footsteps in the hall. Headlights flashed through the windows, and I heard the diminishing howl of a car racing away.

Total silence followed. Higher over far gray hills every time I looked, the full moon seemed oddly peaceful. Susan breathed more quietly. Late in the night, her hand quivered and relaxed in mine.

She was dead.

Just the sniffles, and now she was dead. Alone with her there in the cold moonlight and the musty odors of the room, I felt too numb to grasp anything. Her hand grew cold in mine. When at last I found the will to move, I groped my way down to the dark lobby and banged on the door behind the registration desk until the manager shuffled out with a candle. He was a wheezy old asthmatic in rumpled blue pajamas.

"I feel for you, sir." His watery eyes blinked as if he couldn't really see me. "This killer flu." His teeth out, he was lisping. "My own woman has it. Just a bad cold, the doctor said." His puffy lips twitched over bare red gums. "Our cook — he died last night."

I asked how I could get an ambulance or a doctor or any help at all.

"I don't — don't know, sir." His voice was a broken whisper. "Nobody knows anything."

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"I've got to get somebody."

"Nobody." He tipped his white-wisped head, a blue-veined hand cupped to his ear. "Nothing. Just listen."

All I heard was his raspy breathing.

"A bad time, mister."

I stared till he went on.

"Power out." He blinked at the flickering candle. "We sat all night with an old battery radio. Dialing for news. Nobody knew anything. Not even the president. He came on to say the crisis was only unproven rumors. No terrorist threat. No enemy attack. No natural disaster. No reason for panic except this Siberian flu.

"Just the flu!" A croaking laugh. "It ain't no common flu. Not here and not in Atlanta. Crazy people trying to run away. Peachtree Plaza blocked with piled-up cars. The whole city burning and no fire trucks. Announcers too frightened to make any sense. Till the radio died."

"Bad," I said. "But I've got to get help with my wife."

"Your problem, mister." Bleary eyes squinting across the candle, he coughed at me. "When the cook keeled over, the rest of the help cleared out. You're the last guest. I hope —" Raspingly, he cleared his throat. "Hope the damn bug hasn't got me."

"Can't you —"

"Sorry, mister. Nothing we can do." He shrugged and turned away. "Unless old Jeff comes in."

Jeff was the bellman. He limped up that grand stair at sunrise. Whatever he had heard or seen, it had left him queerly calm. He was left alone in the world, thankful to be spared to his work. The Lord's will be done.

He helped me dig a grave in the weedy yard behind the lodge, and said a prayer when we had Susan's body covered. He unlocked the restaurant to find a simple breakfast for me, and carried my bags down to the rented car and shook his grizzled head when I offered him a twenty.

"The good Lord has spoken, sir. Money don't matter no more."

The manager had found his teeth. His wife was still alive, and he wanted to keep me with them. Following anxiously out to the car, he asked where I was going.

New Mexico, I said.

Still dazed and numb, longing for escape, I recalled the open spaces and the peace of my ranch childhood. Susan was dead. Nothing could ever bring her

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back, but I had LeMoyne's preprint. If I could get it to Eric, if he could use the discovery to end such viral scourges — this hope became my reason to stay alive.

"A long haul, mister, the way things look." The manager blinked away into the haze of sunlit smoke that must have come from fires in Atlanta. He turned abruptly back to clutch my sleeve. "Free room, sir, if you'll stay here with me and the woman till things get better."

I said thanks, and shook my head.

"Won't you — won't you think about it?" His old voice cracked. "After all this, who can you trust?"

"I'll have to trust a man I know in Albuquerque."

"I place my own trust in God." Old Jeff turned from stowing my bags in the trunk. "He sent the visitation because the world has sinned."

"Mister, if you've got to go —" The manager backed uneasily away when I had a fit of sneezing. "Better stay out of Atlanta."

I did, driving west and south along back roads through a landscape eerily emptied since yesterday. Fall colors still splashed the hills. I saw cattle grazing, and once a fast-driven pickup passed me, but the harvest had stopped. The living must have been shut up with the sick and the dead.

A harder impact hit me when I stopped before noon on a hill above the interstate, not far from the Alabama line. Black smoke was still boiling up from piled-up wrecks that blocked a curve. Dead cars and pickups and buses stood in an endless line on the pavement or beside it. I saw live survivors walking, or some of them squatting in little groups around smoky fires, but they seemed terribly few.

Soaked with sweat, I felt suddenly cold and shaking, even in the hot car. My head was throbbing by then, and nothing seemed entirely real. I sat there a long time, coughing till my throat felt raw. Once I dreamed that I was back with Susan at Raventree, black Jeff serving us mint juleps nestled in ice-filled silver bowls. Sipping hers, she joked that she was trying to be a happy guinea pig.

Awake again, or half-awake, I knew she was dead, and remembered Eric. I drove on till the chills came back. I remember a truck stop where I traded my watch for a tank of gas and a six-pack of warm sodas. I remember dead cattle in a meadow, bloated grotesquely, legs stuck straight out, as if they were inflated toys. Black crows were wheeling over them. I remember women and children gathered in a field around men digging a grave. One of the men came out with a rifle to wave me away.

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The car stalled when I tried to turn on a muddy road. I tried to walk away, and found myself so weak I had to crawl back on hands and knees. I remember shivering when night fell around me, and trying not to sleep because I thought I would never wake.

I did wake, on a cot under a high metal roof. I heard a woman's voice, and thought for one happy instant that she was Susan. The flu and the panic seemed stark nightmare till I caught the stink of sickness and heard the drum of a diesel generator and saw the woman over me. A brisk little lady in apron and sunbonnet, she had come to bathe me.

"This killer flu." She answered my hoarse questions. "It hits everybody, but Doc Franken pulls a few of us through."

The hospital was a hasty makeshift, a warehouse built to hold farm equipment. Dr. Franken was a frail oldster who had tried to retire years before. Most of the nurses were farm women and shopgirls whose old jobs had vanished.

They saved my life.

The man on the next cot was Jason Madden, a Taos painter and onetime college professor. The contagion had caught him on the Blue Ridge, he told me, sketching and photographing autumn scenes for a calendar. He had found me unconscious in the car and brought me here before he collapsed.

Where was the LeMoyne preprint?

"Your Holy Grail?" He laughed when I asked about it. "You've been crazy about it, asking everybody and looking for it under your pillow. If it's anything you've got to have, it's probably still in your car."

"I've got to have it," I told him. "If I get out of here alive."

We did recover together, and he became a friend. I remember his talk at night, when the lights were dim and others lay sleeping or brooding with me over all we had lost. I heard his life story. Divorced, with no close kin, he tried to be philosophic about the viral holocaust.

"Wipe it out," he urged me once, when I was silently despondent. "Forget your lost preprint and your dead newspaper. Your dear Susan, if you can. When you stop to think back, our old world wasn't altogether wonderful. Not if you consider all we used to fret about. Ozone and earthquakes. Clothes and success and the new cars we wanted. Politics and wars. Taxes and —"

"Are you happy?" His cheery tone had roused me to interrupt. "Are you glad?"

"Hell no!" He sat up on his cot, glaring at me. "With my whole world

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dead?" On another cot, somebody cursed and called for quiet. Jason lowered his voice. "Of course we've got to try again. Right here we've seen the spirit that will keep the race alive. But — but —" His voice broke into a sob. "Sorry," he whispered. "Sorry. Hard as it is, we've got to carry on."

As I got stronger, he turned inquisitive.

"Who's Eric?" he asked me. "This guy you raved about?"

"An old friend," I said. "A medical researcher, somebody called him the wizard of the viruses. That preprint was for him. A new discovery —"

"Nordman?" he interrupted me. "Eric Nordman?"

I nodded on the pillow.

"I knew him." He stared at me, his hollowed eyes strange. "He approached me to design and illustrate a book he'd written. *The Ultimate Enemy.* You know anything about it?"

I shook my head.

"A scary book." Frown lines bit his fever-drawn face. "He wanted us to limit world populations. Painted a terrible future if we didn't. He wanted me to do the Four Horsemen to head his chapters — four chapters on famine and disease and war and what he called the animal nature of man. His ultimate enemy was us. I never made the drawings, but his book still haunts me."

"Eric himself was haunted —" Another voice shouted for silence, and I dropped to a whisper. "We were together in Africa, through a war and a terrible famine. He came back feeling he'd seen the whole world's fate. Used to say we were prisoners of instinct, breeding ourselves to death. I suppose his book was meant to scare us into action."

"Too scary." Madden shrugged and lay back on his pillow. "His publishers called it too downbeat. Maybe the truth, but nothing the world would want to know. They decided to kill it."

We went to work when we were able, mopping floors and emptying urinals and bedpans till our last patients were up and gone. The dead were buried by then. Power was on. Radio and TV stations were coming back on the air. Trucks from the refinery had come with gasoline. Surviving county officials were back in the courthouse.

I left the hospital with Madden. His plan was a return to his Taos studio, and he offered me a ride to Albuquerque. We found the LeMoyne printout safe in the backseat of my abandoned car, the pages crinkled a little from rain blown in an open window, but still entirely legible. I found a shred of hope in them.

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"If I can find Nordman," I told Madden, "if his lab's still there, if that synthetic molecule can really capture viruses —"

Our drive West took time. Food and gas were scarce. Winter damage to the roads had not been repaired. People still feared strangers who might be carriers. Though the high summits were still white, a green blush of spring had brushed the Sandia slopes before we came down Tijeras canyon into Albuquerque.

South of Central, Madden dropped me off outside a locked gate under a fading sign lettered *Nordman Research, Ltd.* I found a bell and waited a long time before a shabby old man came shuffling down the gravel walk from a long green metal building. He stopped a dozen yards away to shade his eyes against the hot noon sun and smile faintly at a sparrow flying past him with a bit of string. He shrugged and came on and stopped again to stare at me.

"Ben?" His voice was cracked and husky, but one I knew. "I never expected —"

"Eric! I didn't recognize you."

No longer the red-haired Viking, he was gray, bent, shrunken, too small for his baggy sweatshirt and threadbare jeans. After a moment he came on to unlock the gate and offer a lean-boned hand.

"So you made it?" His tone was flat, as if he didn't much care. "How about Susan?"

I told him she was dead.

"Monica, too." I saw emotion then, pain that cut deeper creases under his silver stubble. "We had three kids."

His haggard eyes had found the preprint in my hand.

"Hugo LeMoyne's paper." I gave it to him. "His research report. The one he was going to read at Atlanta." He squinted blankly at it, and I tried to tell him what it might mean. "LeMoyne describes a bioengineered antivirus molecule he'd engineered. His early test results were positive. I hope it's something you can complete —"

"Hugo?" he broke in, no longer listening. "I had him here. Able enough in the lab, but a fool outside. I had to let him go."

He thrust the paper back at me.

"Read it," I urged him. "He said it came from a notion he discussed with you."

He took it back to frown at the title page.

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"Nothing that can matter. Not now." He shrugged at me. "But come inside."

I had expected a warmer welcome. He seemed harried and abstracted, as if absorbed in something more significant, but he locked the gate behind us and nodded for me to follow him down the weed-grown walk and into the low green building. Inside, I saw lab equipment pushed against the walls, autoclaves and centrifuges, computers and electron microscopes, benches stacked with glassware. Most of the floor was clear.

"Our hospital." His rusty voice turned ironic. "Most of our patients are sleeping out behind."

I followed him back into the austere little cubicle where he lived. *Sterile Cultures Only* was still lettered on the refrigerator door. Microwave, can opener, and coffee maker were arrayed on a black-topped workbench. He had a narrow cot and one hard-backed chair. He gave me the chair.

"Want a drink?"

The old Eric had never touched the hard stuff because it killed brain cells, but now he opened the refrigerator for a bottle of water and a laboratory flask that had the reek of straight ethanol. I accepted a cautious shot. He poured himself a stiff jolt of the burning stuff, and gulped it with only a dash of water. Sitting on the cot, he riffled through the preprint.

"Clever work." He tossed it aside. "A bit late."

"Can't you duplicate it?" I pressed him. "LeMoyne hoped to stop the viruses forever."

"Hugo's crazy dream." He paused to frown at one of the water-stained pages. "Though his data does look convincing. I suppose we might have tried it a year or so ago, but now —" He offered me the flask and poured himself another heavy shot. "No point to it now. Not with my staff all scattered or dead."

"No point?" I was puzzled and astonished. "Suppose that virus strikes again?"

"It won't."

"Are you certain? Very little was known —"

"I know more." He seemed very positive. "The agent was a mutant myxovirus. Airborne. It infected the whole population. Survivors are

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immune. It has run its course. With no carriers left, it will soon die out."

"Hard comfort," I muttered. "With so many millions dead."

"Billions." He was bluntly matter-of-fact. "I've got data from contacts all around the world. Mortality rates average 92 percent. Which should leave us around half a billion survivors. A normal load for the planet."

"Normal? What do you mean?"

"We had a dreadful overload." He set his glass aside and leaned toward me somberly. "That hit me hard in Africa. Don't you recall our folly there?" He squinted at me oddly. "Feeling noble if we could save a million starving people. Shutting our eyes to 3 million of their hapless kids, doomed to a worse fate in the next generation."

I pushed the chair back and sat shaking my head.

"We forget what we are." He raised his raspy voice, as if lecturing a backward student. "One more animal species, evolved in natural balance. Our numbers kept in check by predators, disease, and food supplies — till we upset the natural system with modern sanitation and well-intended efforts like we made in Africa."

I sat staring at him, chilled and trembling, recalling what Madden had said about his unpublished book.

"Remember the rabbit-coyote cycle?" Seeing my shock, he tried to be persuasive. "It acts to keep both species alive in a natural equilibrium. The coyotes eat the rabbits. They multiply till most of the rabbits are gone. After they starve out, the rabbits return."

"I've heard you called the wizard virologist." My voice was shaking. "Did you —"

I couldn't finish the question, and he ignored it.

"We're animals," he repeated. "Back in prehistory, we had to respect our natural limits. When hunting was poor or the rains failed, we knew that some had to die. The problems began when we got too clever. Or maybe not clever enough. Beginning with fire and the ax and the plow, we violated nature. We burned the forests and plowed the prairies and hunted most animals into extinction. We kept on till we had to be stopped."

"So you admit —"

This time he seemed to understand. He had sunk into a huddle on the cot, haggard face jutting toward me. He sat for half a minute, blink-

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ing at me, before he gathered himself to gesture at the yellowed printout he had tossed to the floor.

"I guess you've earned a confession, if you brought that paper all the way from Atlanta."

"You— You—" I sobbed for breath. "You admit you've murdered most of mankind?"

I saw his arm swung up to shield his face, and found my own raised high, about to hurl my tumbler at his head.

"It's done, Ben." The glass slid out of my hand and shattered on the floor. "We can't undo it."

"You've been planning this — concocting your deadly myxovirus —" I couldn't go on. I remember the chill in that dim little room, the reek of ethanol, the muffled hum of a computer fan. "Ever since we got home from Africa?"

"Ten years, Ben. Designing it very carefully, so I thought, to restore the state of nature through a uniform pruning of the race. Running animal tests till I thought I was sure."

"Ten years?"

"It was hard, Ben. Hard!"

His shriveled body shook, and he sat a long time staring at that crumpled printout, biting his lip till I saw the color of blood.

"Because of Monica most of all —" He was whispering hoarsely at the floor. "Though I didn't expect to live — and I wish I hadn't!" He clenched his stubbled jaws and raised his sick eyes to mine, somehow almost apologetic. "I waited, Ben. As long as I could. Till Cranley forced my hand."

"Huh? How was that?"

"Hugo fell out with me. I never quite knew why, but I was afraid he'd begun to guess what I planned. When Cranley invited us both to his flu symposium, I thought it was probably now or never." Tears shone in his red and deep-sunk eyes. "I meant well, Ben." Hoarsely, he was whispering now. "I did it to ensure a future for mankind. If you can believe me —"

I shook my head and asked what he had done.

"The Siberian flu —" He drew a long, unsteady breath before he went on. "It made a natural cover, because the initial symptoms weren't all that different. I loaded my own virus into aerosol cans labeled *anti-*

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perspirant, and flew around the world, spraying it into every plane and terminal I entered."

Too shaken to think or speak, I sat with him there in that narrow and windowless room, breathing his ethanol, recalling random moments of our days together at Cal Tech and in Africa, remembering our double wedding, remembering the julep Susan couldn't drink, remembering LeMoyne and the printout.

"Are you sure?" I asked at last. "Is your virus actually extinct?"

"Certain enough." He nodded, seeming calmer. "Not that it can ever matter."

I caught my breath to ask him why, and found no will to speak.

"A side effect — one I failed to catch." He shrugged abjectly, his voice fallen almost too low for me to hear. "The tests had to be secret, of course, and you can imagine the danger. Blame me —" Defiance flickered and died in his eyes. "If blame could matter now —"

"What effect?" I whispered.

"The virus infects all mammals." His voice rose a little, still slow and toneless. "The survivors seem entirely normal, the females fertile. What I never suspected is the genetic damage we've recently discovered in small mammals. Lab tests confirm it in the larger animals, including humans.

"The offspring are born sterile. Our children will be the last generation." He paused and spoke more loudly, in a tone of harsh finality. "The age of mammals is over."

I sat there, stunned.

"But there are the birds." His faint smile dazed me. "The birds at least were immune. That's something, Ben. They'll have their turn. I'm happy now to see a sparrow building her nest. It means life can continue. We've finished our turn. The dinosaurs had theirs, before that asteroid fell. I hope the birds do better."

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Regular readers will note that Algis Budrys' book review column is missing this month. Instead, we provide the entire text of his new, long-awaited novel, Hard Landing. *Algis Budrys has written only a handful of novels, but each one of them is a classic in the field. From* Rogue Moon *to* Who? *to* Michaelmas, *each book has used sf to provide a clearer vision of the world we live in.* Hard Landing *does the same.*

HARD LANDING

By Algis Budrys

PART OF A REPORT LATER REMOVED FROM THE AO/LGM FILE ON NEVILLE SEALMAN

The electrocuted man was found dead on the northbound tracks of the Borrow Street station of the Chicago Transit Authority suburban line in Shoreview, Illinois.

Shoreview is a city of eighty thousand located on the Lake Michigan western shore immediately north of Chicago. For our purposes here, it can be regarded simply as a place where middle-class Chicago employees sleep and do their weekend errands.

It was early March, and the time was 5:50 p.m. . . . a dark, chilled, wet evening. No witnesses to the death of the individual calling himself Neville Sealman have come forward.

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Despite the occurrence on CTA property, the Shoreview Police Department took jurisdiction and investigated. (The CTA police force is strictly a peacekeeping body.) Sergeant Dothan Stablits of the Shoreview P.D. was assigned. Before the body was moved, a representative of the CTA legal department arrived, and was extended cooperation by investigator Stablits. *They went through the decedent's pockets together.*

The contents supported identification of the decedent as Neville Unruh Sealman, a resident of south Shoreview. Documentation included an Illinois state driver's license, and Social Security and Blue Cross cards found in his unrifled wallet, which also contained a normal amount of cash.

Social Security files later revealed the number had been issued against a falsified application. The driver's license had been properly acquired so far as procedures at the Illinois examining station went. (The decedent, however, never owned a car.) Records show the applicant identified himself at the time with a certified copy of Neville Sealman's birth certificate, which seems to have been acquired through the now well-known method of searching small-town newspaper obituaries for the names of persons dead in infancy. (Neville Unruh Sealman, b.-d. 1932, Mattoon, Ill.) The decedent's thirtyish appearance was consistent with the claimed age of forty-three on the license.

The body was turned over to the Cook County coroner's office, and a search for next of kin was instituted. (None were ever located; no friends were found, and no one who had been acquainted with the decedent any longer than the forty-two months of his residence and employment in the Chicago area. All the decedent's acquaintances were fellow employees or neighbors.)

Investigation at Sealman's home address — an apartment four stops before the stop where the body was found — developed the information that Sealman lived alone and unvisited in a furnished one-and-one-half-room efficiency. Any clues found in the apartment all supported the Sealman identity, and none of them were older than the time of Sealman's successful application for employment at Magnussen Engineering Co.

Magnussen is a free-lance drafting shop in a Chicago loft, and the requirement for filling a job opening is the ability to demonstrate standard proficiency at the craft; a Social Security number is the only document required of a prospective employee. No further information of any kind relating to his identity was ever found. His dwelling was unusually bare of knickknacks and personality. Nothing was found to indicate that he had ever been treated by any medical or dental facility, and this proved to be a matter of some concern in the initial investigation. (See further.)

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Inquiry by Dothan Stablits at Magnussen indicated Sealman had been employed there since purportedly moving from Oakland, Calif. On the day of his death, he had left work at 5:00 P.M. as usual and boarded the Shoreview Express at the elevated State Street platform of the CTA. The northbound platform is visible from the windows of his place of employment, and he was observed in this action by his employer, who also described him as a steady, hardworking individual with nervous mannerisms and a lack of sociability.

Sealman's apartment was in due course released to the building management, and the personal contents transferred to the Cook County coronor's warehouse, where they remain unclaimed. Sergeant Stablits's report accurately describes them as items of clothing and personal-care products purchasable at chain outlets in the Chicago/Shoreview vicinity. [A copy of that report is attached.] [Attachment 6]

Sergeant Stablits's Occurrence Report [Attachment 1] reflects a certain degree of uneasiness with the circumstances of the decendent's death.

The Borrow Street station is located in a purely residential section. The timing indicates Sealman must have ridden directly past his normal stop, but Stablits was unable to ascribe a reason for his doing so. Despite publicity in the Chicago news media and in the weekly *Shoreview Talk* newspaper, no one ever reported Sealman missing from an intended visit. Sergeant Stablits (now Chief Stablits of the Gouldville, Indiana, Police Department) clearly felt that this loose end impeded a satisfactory clearance of Sealman's file. But despite Sealman's insufficient bona fides, there was nothing actually inconsistent with a finding of accidental death, and no compelling reasons to expend further resources and press the investigation farther — for instance, out of state to Oakland. When the FBI proved to have no record of his fingerprints, his file, though not closed, was simply kept available in the event some fresh occurrence might reactivate it. No such event took place.

The CTA legal department at first took a more than routine interest in the case. The Borrow Street station dates from 1912. It is located in a deep, open cut well below the level of adjacent strteets and dwellings, the right-of-way north of the Chicago elevated structures having gradually gone to street level and then below. This secluded location added to the unlikelihood of finding a witness to explain Sealman's death. It's safe to say the CTA was anticipating a negligence lawsuit by heirs.

Portions of the station structure have weathered to a rickety condition, and it is scheduled to be completely rebuilt in 1981. The condition of the platform is decrepit; in addition, half the platform lights are not functional, and the exit stairs up to street level, cast in reinforced concrete, and thus subject to extreme weathering action once the surface had spalled away to

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the included rust-prone steel, are frankly hazardous.

(The CTA operates at a loss, and is seeking some sort of public subsidy. Its trackage and equipment include property acquired from inefficient predecessor operating authorities and bankrupt private traction companies.)

Despite the nonappearance of immediate potential litigants, the CTA felt that all possible steps should be taken to exclude the possibility of the decedent's having tripped, fallen to the tracks, and contacted the third rail as the result of some structural feature of the platform. Frankly, that seemed an obvious possibility, but a history of cardiovascular disorders in Sealman, or some other cause of chronic vertigo, would have done much to brighten up the CTA's files. Almost as satisfactory would have been evidence to support a finding of probable suicide, or even of foul play. On none of these possibilities was Sergeant Stablits able to turn up anything that would help.

On finding there were no medical or dental offices located within reasonable distance of the stop, he made no further effort to locate any medical practitioner who might have had Sealman as a patient. His interest was limited to finding a reason for Sealman's presence on that platform that night, and he indicated to the CTA that if they wanted to check with every doctor in the Chicago area, they could do that on their own budget. After this time the CTA and Shoreview P.D. efforts continued separately (and terminated inconclusively separately).

In this atmosphere a number of private as well as official communications were exchanged between the CTA, the Cook County Medical Examiner's office, and individuals therein acting on an informal basis. As a consequence the Medical Examiner's office assigned its most experienced forensic pathologist to the autopsy, and that individual proceeded with great care and attention to detail.

Soon after beginning his examination of the thoracic cavity, this pathologist — Albert Camus, M.D. — notified the Medical Examiner that he was encountering noteworthy anomalies. The procedure was then confidentially completed in the presence of the Medical Examiner, and certain administrative decisions were then made.

The findings filed were consistent with death by electrocution and no other cause, which was in fact true according to the evidence, and the CTA was so notified. At some point, it must have become increasingly clear that no legatees were in the offing, so the CTA may not have taken Dr. Camus's official report as hard as it would have a few days sooner. In any event the CTA's file has subsequently been marked Inactive, and there has been no change in that status.

The Medical Examiner's file, however, reflects the great number of confusions raised by the pathologist's discovery of what he described as "a

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high-capacity, high-pressure" cardiovascular system, as well as a number of other significant and anatomically consistent variations from the norm. [Attachment 2]

At Dr. Camus's suggestion, a telephone call was placed to this office,* with the objective of determining whether these findings were unique.

On receipt of the call here, a case officer (undersigned) was immediately allocated by the Triage Section and put on the line. A request was made to the Cook County Medical Examiner for a second autopsy, and Dr. William Henshaw, a resource of this office, was dispatched to Shoreview via commercial air transportation. [Attachment 7, Voucher of Expenses]

At the same time, an AO/LGM Notification was forwarded to our parent organization. (EXCERPT ENDS)

(NOTE: CASE OFFICER'S SIGNATURE ILLEGIBLE)

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF PATHOLOGICAL ANOMALIES

THE NATIONAL REGISTER of Pathological Anomalies is federally funded and was formed in the late 1940s. It publishes bulletins to tax-supported pathological services and other interested parties. This information is restricted to describing unusual anatomical structures and functions found in the course of routine postmortem examinations.

There are a number of "usual" anomalies, and the NRPA doesn't concern itself with them. Quite a few people have their hearts located toward the right side of the chest, or are born without a vermiform appendix. Extra fingers and toes, and anomalous genitalia are other everyday examples. One of the earliest things a medical student learns is that the details of any given human being's internal arrangements will be roughly similar to, but teasingly different from, the tidy diagrams in the textbooks. This happens without impairing the individual's general function as a clearly, understandably human and essentially healthy organism. Anatomy classes dispel any notion that God works with a cookie cutter. The idea they do create is that the mechanisms of life are both subtler and more determined to proceed than most people can imagine. In many cases, these anomalies are successful enough so that they're never noted during the individual's lifetime. Since most deaths are not followed by autopsies, there are no reliable statistics on how prevalent all this might be.

What this does mean is that there are any number of individuals walking around who will respond peculiarly to conventional medical and

*The National Register of Pathological Anomalies, Washington, D.C.

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surgical treatment, who might overcome what ought to be disabling or fatal injuries while succumbing to apparently minor accidents, or who might even be able to evade normal methods of restraint and punishment — to name a few areas of intense interest to authorities charged with the maintenance of the public health and good order.

The NRPA publications concern themselves only with extreme cases. They also draw exact distinctions between kinds of extreme. There are what might be called man-made anomalies — defects almost certainly created by actions of various manufactured substances upon the individual's mother during her pregnancy. These, while not completely cataloged, are part of a distinct field of medical investigation that's keeping reasonable pace with the ingenuities of recreational drug use and the pyramiding effects of modern industrial chemistry. The NRPA describes apparent cases in this category when they're found, and this reason alone suffices to make its bulletins widely studied. But there is another category.

Occasionally an autopsy will turn up organs, or even systems of organs, that are truly unique and whose function, in fact, may not be understandable to the resources of the pathologist who discovers them. The NRPA is very quick to react positively in such cases. At once, it will give the examiner all the help and information humanly possible, and join in delving into the matter thoroughly. As a result of its reputation for this sort of help, always welcomed even by pathology departments that have been nominally well funded, the NRPA's twenty-four-hour phone number is kept very much in mind throughout all nations signatory to the cross-cooperation agreements fostered by the World Health Organization.

It should be understood that almost invariably, one mundane explanation or the other is finally found for the seeming anomaly displayed by the particular case.

The NRPA's annual budget is drawn against funds made available by Congress to a parent organization. This form of second-derivative funding is common in cases where the parent organization is the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or the National Security Agency, to name just three. It hasn't been possible for me to determine the NRPA's parent organization.

AO stands for "anomalous organs." Most NRPA files are headed with the AO prefix followed by a number coded to show the date the file was opened and predict when it might be closed. These files form the basis for most of the material in the bulletins, and are of unquestionable immediate value to medical specialists dealing with the results of human interactions.

A far lesser portion of the files are headed AO/LGM, in which the second set of initials in the prefix is said to represent "less germane matters." Access to and use of these files is restricted to the top echelons of NRPA. An

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AO/LGM Notification — at one time a slip printed on red paper, now an advice preceded by a special tone signal on the NRPA's computerized communications devices, which connect to God knows where — is required the instant a new file in this category is opened. At NRPA, which is housed in a three-story red-brick Georgian with a very nice little company café under the trees in the backyard, there's an office joke that LGM really stands for Little Green Men. —A.B.

PRELUDE TO EVENTS EARLY ON A MARCH EVENING

JACK MULLICA had almost stopped being annoyed with Selmon for riding the same train with him. It had now been three and a half years since he had first seen Selmon standing at the other end of the State Street northbound platform in the five o'clock sunshine of late September.

It had been nothing like it was in the winter, when the wind they called The Hawk hunted through the Loop. The people among whom they stood had their heads up, and did not jockey to take shelter behind each other on the elevated platform.

Their eyes met across an interval of some ten yards, and Selmon's mouth dropped open. Not until he saw the stranger's reaction did Mullica fully realize what had been naggingly familiar about him. Mullica watched a look of total defeat come over Selmon. He stood there, shorter and a little chubbier than Mullica remembered him, his head now down, his herringbone topcoat suddenly too big for him, a briefcase hanging from one hand, a *Daily News* from the other. He didn't even board the train. He stayed where he was, washed by low-angle sunlight and forlorn, thunderstruck, waiting at least for the next train, not looking in the window as Mullica rode by him.

But the next night, he had boarded, and hadn't gotten off until just a few stops before Mullica's, staring rigidly ahead and keeping his shoulders stiff. It had become a regular thing. Selmon rode as many cars away from Mullica as he could. He was there almost every night Mullica was. Mullica traveled out of town fairly frequently. He assumed Selmon didn't, though at first he watched carefully behind him in airline terminals and out at motels. But Selmon never turned up anywhere else, and he never made any attempt at an approach. After a while Mullica decided that was how it was going to be.

Gradually, thinking about it in the slow, schooled way he had taught himself, Mullica reached an accommodation with it. He assumed that Selmon had simply happened to take a job nearby, and that the rest of it was natural enough; it was all coincidence, Selmon's working near Mullica and living in the same town with Mullica and his wife, Margery.

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The Shoreview Express was designed to handle North Shore traffic in and out of the Loop. Once it had made all the Loop stops, picking up shoppers on the East and South sides, and management types on the West and North, it paused at the Merchandise Mart, and then didn't stop again until Loyola University. It rumbled directly over the worst parts of the North Side on girdered elevated tracks, and then imperceptibly began running on a solid-earthen viaduct through blue-collar and then lower-middle-class residential neighborhoods. The farther north it ran, the more respectable its environment became and the more out-of-place the shabby old string of riveted iron cars appeared, until it reached the end of Chicago at Howard Street, entered Shoreview as an all-stops local, and began to look quaint.

Its first Shoreview stop was Elm Shore Avenue, in an area only slightly distinguishable from the red-brick northernmost part of Chicago, and this was where Selmon got off. Mullica lived in a white-and-yellow high rise near the Borrow Street stop, which the train reached rattling over switch points, its collector shoes arcing, flashing, and sputtering over gaps in the third-rail system; at night, it rode through sheets of violet fire. The train's next and last destination was in Wilmette, which was yet another municipality, and where one could begin to see the prewar money living in its rows of increasingly large and acreage-enshrouded mansions all the way up the lakefront for miles. From Wilmette and beyond, they usually drove into the city in cars suitable for after-nine arrivals, or took the North Western Rail Road and smoked and played bridge.

Mullica's hours in the Chicago public relations office of one of the major automobile manufacturers were nominally nine to five. He usually got in about 9:15, getting back some of the 3:00 A.M.s on the road. He never saw Selmon in the morning; probably he had to be at work by 8:30.

At night on the platform, Selmon would open his paper as soon as he was through the turnstile. He would read it at his end of the platform, holding it in front of his face. Mullica would stand just where he had stood every time since years before Selmon. Mullica opened his paper on the train, and when he was nearly finished, the sound of the wheels echoing back would tell him they were off the viaducts and beginning to run between the weed-grown cutbanks of the right-of-way in north Shoreview. He'd fold his paper, get up from the warped, timeworn cane seat, and go stand in the chipped brown vestibule, waiting for the uncertain brakes to drag the train to a halt. He'd get off, walk the three blocks to the condominium, greet Margery if she was home, have a drink looking out over the lake with a closed expression, and do the crossword puzzle in ink before throwing the paper out. He wished Selmon would play by the rules and move away. But Selmon wouldn't. He continued to work

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somewhere in the Loop at something, and to live somewhere two miles south.

AN OCCURRENCE EARLY ON A MARCH EVENING

MULLICA NEVER saw Selmon in Shoreview on weekends. Margery liked to go shopping in the big malls at Old Orchard and Golf Mill; Mullica had a Millionaires' Club membership, and sometimes they'd sit there after shopping, sipping. Sometimes then Mullica would be able to just stare over Margery's shoulder and think about any number of things. At times, he thought of Selmon. He wondered if Selmon hid in his home on weekends, and if he had found a wife, and, if so, how they got along. He wondered if Margery might run into her someday and if, by some coincidence, they might get friendly enough to talk about their husbands. But it seemed unlikely; Margery didn't get along with women.

And then it was early March, forty-two months since Selmon had turned up. Mullica stood on the platform, his hands deep in his pockets. It was a cold, raw day. He watched Selmon stubbornly unfolding his paper against the wind, and clutching it open as he began to read. Then, just as their train began to pull into the station, Selmon saw something in the paper that made him turn his face toward Mullica in the twilight in a white blur of dismay, his mouth a dark, open oval; and Mullica thought for a minute Selmon had felt a vessel exploding in his brain.

The train pulled up, and Mullica stepped aboard. He moved down the aisle and took a seat next to a window. He looked out at Selmon's spot as the train passed by it, thinking he might see Selmon lying there huddled in a crowd, but he wasn't there.

Mullica put his zipcase across his knees and opened his paper, sitting there reading from front to back as he always did, while the train crossed the river toward the Merchandise Mart. He stopped to look eastward along the river, as he always did, year-round, enjoying the changing light of the seasons on the buildings and the water and horizon. The riverfront buildings were just turning into boxes of nested light, their upper-story glass still reflecting the last streaks of dying pink from the sunset, and the stars were beginning to appear in the purplish black sky above the lake.

Page Two had the story:

Not-So-Ancient Astronauts!

'THING' IN JERSEY SWAMP IS SAUCER, EXPERT SAYS

Philadelphia, March 9 (AP) — Swamp-draining crews in New Jersey may have found a spaceship, declared scientist Allen Wolverton

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today.

Authorities on the spot immediately denied that old bogland being readied for a housing development held anything mysterious.

Local authorities agreed a domed metal object, fifty feet across, was dragged from the soil being reclaimed from Atlantic coastal marshes. They quickly pointed out, however, that there is a long history of people living in the swamps, described as the last rural area remaining on the Eastern Seaboard between Boston and Virginia.

The area was populated and prosperous in colonial times, the center of a thriving "bog-iron" mining industry. Local experts were quick to point to this as the likely source of the object, citing it as some sort of machinery or a storage bin.

"There was whole towns and stagecoach stops back in there once," said Henry Stemmler, operator of a nearby crossroads grocery store. "Big wagon freight yards and everything. There's all kinds of old stuff down in the bogs."

Dissenting is Wolverton, a lecturer at Philadelphia's Franklin Planetarium. "Our Earth is only one of thousands of inhabitable planets," he declared. "Statistically, the Galaxy must hold other intelligent races. It would be unreasonable to suppose at least one of them isn't visiting us and surreptitiously observing our progress toward either an enlighted civilization of peace and love or total self-destruction."

There was a blurred two-column wirephoto of two men standing in some underbrush, staring at a curved shape protruding from the ground. There were no clearly defined features, and the object's outline was broken by blending into the angular forms of a dredge in the background. It might have been anything — the lid of a large silo, part of an underground oil tank, or the work of a retoucher's brush. In fact, the paper's picture editor had obviously decided the wirephoto would reproduce badly, and had his artist do some outlining and filling. So the result was a considerable percentage away from reality.

Mullica read the other stories on the page, and on the next page, and turned it.

It was night when the train reached Borrow Street; full dark, with only a few working bulbs in chipped old white enamel lamps to light the winter-soaked, rotting old wooden platform.

It's all going to hell, Mullica thought. No one maintains anything that isn't absolutely vital, but the fare keeps going up and up.

No one manned the station except during morning rush hour on the

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southbound side. The concrete steps from the northbound platform up to the frontage street were a forty-foot gravel slide with broken reinforcing bars protruding through it rustily to offer the best footholds.

Mullica began to move toward the exit gates in the middle of the platform, lining up with the others who'd gotten off. They were all head-down, huddling against the wind, concentrating their minds on getting through the revolving metal combs of the gate and picking their way up the incline. And then, because he had not quite put it all out of his mind, and his skin was tight under the hairs of his body, he had the feeling to turn his head. When he did, he saw Selmon still standing where he had gotten off, his paper half-raised toward Mullica, his apparition coming and going in the passing window lights as the train went on. Mullica could see he was about to call out a name nobody knew.

Mullica stopped, and the small crowd flowed around him inattentively. He walked back to Selmon. "They'll find us!" Selmon blurted. "They'll trace us down!"

Mullica looked at him carefully. Then he said: "How will they do that?", picking and arranging the words with care, the language blocky on his tongue. He watched Selmon breathe spasmodically, his mouth quivering. He saw that Selmon was years younger than he, though they were the same age, and soft. And yet there was advanced deterioration in him. It was in the shoulders and the set of the head, and very much in the eyes as well. Selmon clutched at his arm as they stood alone on the platform. Selmon's hand moved more rapidly than one would expect, but slowly for one of their kind of people, and uncertainly.

"Arvan, it's bound to happen," Selmon insisted to him. "They — they have evidence." He pushed the paper forward. Mullica ignored it.

"No, Selmon," he said as calmly as he could. "They won't know what to do with it. There's nothing they can learn from it. The engines melted themselves, and we destroyed the instruments before we left it, remember?"

"But they have the hull, Arvan! Real metal you can touch, hit with a hammer. A real piece of evidence. How can they ignore that?"

"Come on. Their investigators constantly lie to their own populace and file their secrets away. They systematically ridicule anyone who wants to look for us, and they defame them." Mullica was trying to think of how to deal with this all. He wanted Selmon to cross over to the deserted southbound platform and go home to his wife. Mullica wanted to go home; even to have a drink with Margery, and then sit in his den reading the specification sheets on the new product. It was some twenty-five years since he'd been a navigator.

"Arvan, what are we going to do? How can you ignore this?" Selmon wouldn't let go of Mullica's forearm, and his grip was epileptically tight.

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He peered up into Mullica's face. "You're old, Arvan," he accused. "You look like one of them. That haircut. Those clothes. All mod. A middle-aged macho. You're becoming like them!"

"I live among . . . them."

"I should have spoken to you years ago!"

"You shouldn't be speaking to me at all. Why are you here? There's the entire United States. There's the whole world, if you can find your way across a border. A whole world, just a handful of us, and you stay here!"

Selmon shook his head. "I was in Oakland for a long time. Then I bumped into Hanig on a street in San Francisco. He told me to go away, too."

"He spoke to you?" Mullica asked sharply.

"He had to. He — he wanted me out of there. He'd been in the area less time than I had, but he had a business, and a family, and I was alone."

"A family."

"He married a widow with children and a store; a fish store. So I agreed to leave. He gave me some money, and I came to Chicago."

Well, if navigators could write public relations copy, copilots could sell fish. What did engineering officers do to make their way in this world? Mullica wondered, but Selmon gave him no opportunity to ask.

"Hanig had seen Captain Ravashan. In passing. He didn't think Ravashan saw him. In Denver. That was why he left there and came to San Francisco. And then I came to Chicago, and almost the first week, I saw you. I — I think we're too much alike when we react to this world. We wander toward the same places, and move in the same ways."

"Does anyone know where the chaplain is?" Mullica asked quickly.

"Chaplain Joro?" Selmon asked. He and Mullica looked into each other's eyes. "No, I don't think there's much doubt." And for a moment, there was a bond of complete understanding between the two of them. Mullica nodded. Over a quarter of a century, he saw, Selmon as well as he had reflected on the matter. It had seemed to him for a long time that there were only four of them now.

Selmon looked up at him in weariness. "It's no use, Arvan. I —" He hung his head. "I have a good job. It doesn't pay much, but I don't need much, and it's secure. So I decided to stay. You never asked me to leave." There were tears in his eyes. "I'm very tired, Arvan," he whispered, and Mullica saw the guilt in him, waiting to be punished.

But there was no telling whether any engineering officer could have solved the problem with the engines. Mullica had never thought much of Selmon, but Ditlo Ravashan had never questioned his ability in front of the rest of them, and there hadn't been any backbiting after the crash.

"This isn't anything, Selmon. There'll be a flurry, but it'll blow over.

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Somebody'll write another one of those books — that planetarium lecturer, probably — and everyone with any common sense will laugh at it."

"But they've never had evidence before!" He was almost beating at Mullica with his newspaper, waving his free arm. "Now they do!"

"How do you know what they have or haven't had? They must have. They have enough films, and enough unexplained things in their history. They must have other pieces of crashed or jettisoned equipment, too. They just don't know how to deal with them. And they won't know how to deal with this, either."

"Arvan! An intact hull, and instruments obviously destroyed after the landing! A ship buried in a swamp. Buried, Arvan — not driven into the ground. And five empty crew seats behind an open hatch!"

"A hull full of mud. If they ever shovel it all out, it'll be weeks . . . and all those weeks, their bureaucracy will be working on everyone to forget it."

"Arvan, I don't understand you! Don't you care?"

"Care? I was a navigator in the stars."

"And what are you now?"

"What are you, Selmon?" Mullica pushed him away, but Selmon still clung to his arm. They staggered on the platform.

"Arvan, we have to plan. We have to find the others and plan together, he begged, weeping.

"Four of us together," Mullica said, saying the number aloud for the first time, hearing his voice harsh and disgusted, aching deeper in his throat than he had become accustomed to speaking. "So they can have us all — a complete operating crew. An engineer, a navigator who knows the courses, a pilot, and a copilot life-systems man. To go with the hull and their industrial capacity. You want us to get together, so they can find us and break out uncontrolled in our domains."

Four men with similarly odd configurations of their wrists and ankles. Four men with similar skin texture. Four men with high blood pressure and a normal body temperature of one hundred; with hundreds of idiosyncrasies in cell structure, blood typing, and, most certainly, chromosome structure. Four such men in a room, secretively discussing something vital in a language no one spoke.

"Arvan!"

"God damn it, Selmon, let go of me!" Mullica shouted in English. "Fuck off!"

Selmon jerked backward. He stared as if Mullica had slashed his throat, and as he stepped backward, he pushed Mullica away, pushing himself back. His mouth was open again.

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Hopeless, hopeless, Mullica thought, trying to regain his balance so he could reach for Selmon, watching Selmon's wounded eyes, his newspaper fanning open ridiculously, stepping back with one heel on thin air.

He hit the tracks with a gasping outcry. Mullica jumped forward and looked down. Selmon sat sprawled over the rails, his paper scattered over the ties, in the greasy mud and the creosote-stained ballast, looking up at Mullica with the wind knocked out of him. The distant lights and violet sputtering of the next train were coming up the track from down at the previous station. Mullica squatted down to reach for him, holding out his hand. Selmon fumbled to push himself up, staring at Mullica. Neither spoke. Groping for something firm to grasp, Selmon put his hand on the third rail.

The flash and the gunlike crack threw Mullica down flat on the platform, nearly blind. But I think I will still be able to see him anytime, Mullica thought in his native language as he threw himself up to his feet and ran, ran faster than anyone had ever seen Jack Mullica run, caroming through the exit gate and up the weathered steps, realizing he had never at any time let go of his zipcase, and thinking: Now we are three.

TRANSCRIBED CONVERSATION BETWEEN ALBERT CAMUS AND WILLIAM HENSHAW

Camus: You've seen one of these before, haven't you?

Henshaw: Prob'ly. You know, I can never get used to how cold it gets in these places.

Camus: Rather have it cold than hot. Look, if you're going to let me assist you in the first place, talk to me, will you?

Henshaw: I can talk some. And you can watch anythin' you can see. Can't at all limit you from thinking.

Camus: I can see you know exactly what to look for.

Henshaw: What you see is somebody who knows what to expect. What to look for may be somethin' else again.

Camus: Well-made point, Doctor.

Henshaw: Reach me that thing over there, will you?

Camus: You know, if I saw him on the street, I wouldn't think twice. But now look at that.

Henshaw: You'd figure that jaw came from a malocclusion, right? And that skin color — just like a normal Caucasian, maybe a little toward the extreme with his oxygen metabolism, right? But now you take some of them scrapin's and stick 'em under a microscope, and. . . .

Camus: Yes, I've done that.

Henshaw: Figured. That's why I let you stay. Might as well. Here — you see that wrist? What do you figure that to be?

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Camus: A thick wrist. I never would look at it.

Henshaw: Yeah. But let's just flap this back a little, and —

Camus: Holy cats!

Henshaw: Right. There's your proximal row. You see that bone? That's what he's got instead of a navicular. Great blood supply, too. First of all, he can't break it anywhere near as readily as people do. Second, if it breaks, it heals nice and slick. But how does he break it? Look at all those cushions in the cartilaginous structure. And let me tell you something else — all the joints are engineered like that. These people don't get arthritis; they don't get sprains; they maybe once in a blue moon get breaks. It's like those teeth; never seen a dentist's drill. This is a healthy, healthy guy.

Camus: And it all still fits inside a normal shape, more or less.

Henshaw: Fits exactly. He's the normal shape for what he is.

Camus: What is he?

Henshaw: You know, down in South America lots of millions of years ago, they had things that were shaped almost exactly like camels — but they weren't mammals, they were marsupials, and their skeletons weren't put together like camel skeletons. I went to that museum they have down there in Guayaquil and looked at some of those bones; looked stranger than anything we've got lying here in front of us today. But once the musculature was on the bone, and the hide was on the muscles, if you saw that thing walk out from behind a rock at you, it was a camel. They had tigers like that, too. Things evolve to fit needs in the ecology. Life needed camels in the high-altitude deserts, and the camels needed tigers to prey on them. Time passed; they went away. Now down there, they got llamas and guanacos and jaguars, and if some marsupial medico had to take 'em apart, wouldn't he be surprised.

Camus: This guy is a mammal.

Henshaw: Well, yeah. You put him in a raincoat and boots, he can stand a short-arm check with everybody else in the platoon, no doubtin' that.

Camus: What's next, Doctor?

Henshaw: No sense goin' any further here. He checks out for type. And I've got my tissue and blood samples to take back to my lab, so I'd better get goin'. Somebody'll be around to pick him up in a couple of hours. They'll give you a receipt for him. I don't think you'll get any grieving relatives. If anybody does come around and ask for him, stall and call the hot line. You'll get

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quick relief.

Camus: I have to have the coronor's O.K. before I can give him to you.

Henshaw: No problem. I brought a letter with me.

Camus: Now what?

Henshaw: How do you mean?

Camus: What do I have to sign? What sort of oath do I swear?

Henshaw: Hell, you're not going to mess up. You've got yourself a nice position here, lots of contacts with the local politics; family, property . . . all that good shit.

Camus: I suppose so. You wouldn't happen to have an opening in your department?

Henshaw: My department?

Camus: Wherever you really come from.

Henshaw: I really come from the NRPA, and I'm all the medical talent they need. This doesn't come up every day, you know. Besides, they wouldn't consider you qualified. Sorry.

Camus: I don't believe I've read any of your papers, Doctor. Or run into you at pathology convention seminars. Where'd you get your training?

Henshaw: Iowa. University of Iowa School of Veterinary Medicine, Doctor.

LATER EVENTS ON A MARCH NIGHT

IT WAS A nice condominium apartment: four and one-half rooms high enough up, with gold, avocado, and persimmon carpeting; French Provincial furnishings from John M. Smythe; a patio balcony with sliding glass doors; swag lamps; and a Tandberg Dolby cassette system that he switched on automatically for warmth. Barbra Streisand sang "I'll Tell the Man in the Street."

Margery wasn't home. Mullica got some ice in a rocks glass, picked up the scotch decanter, and sat in the living room with the lights down. He sipped and looked out through the glass doors and past the wrought-iron balcony railing at the lake. Below his line of sight were the tops of the as-yet-unbudded famous elms of Shoreview. Far down the lake shore, curving out to his extreme right, were the tall, lighted embrasures of the Gold Coast high rises in Chicago.

He took a deep breath. What will happen? he thought. Let's put it together. He began systematically reviewing the events on the Borrow Street platform. Then he pictured a detective in his trench coat kneeling beside the facedown body in the headlight from the stopped 5:50 train. He put dialogue in the detective's head to indicate what the detective might

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make of what there was to see. He listened critically. The ice cubes were cold against his upper lip.

The detective saw that Selmon had been electrocuted. He saw nothing to show that the dead man had been the victim of an assault. So it was clearly something that had happened by itself, an accident or suicide, and there was no need for an autopsy. Now the detective went through the dead man's pockets. If he'd done that to Jack Mullica, he wouldn't have found any connection to any abandoned bog-iron works.

Selmon's identity wouldn't be particularly thin. He'd have a Social Security card so he could work, and probably a driver's license. He surely had a checking account, and it was practically impossible to convert checks into spot cash without a driver's license, even if you never drove.

Now the detective moved to Selmon's apartment. Again there'd be nothing of any significance. Unless Selmon still had parts of his first-aid kit and was stupid enough to store them where he lived. But after more than twenty years, what would he have left, no matter how healthy he looked? No, it wouldn't be the presence of anything that bothered the detective. It would be absence. No military service records, no school diplomas.

Would that matter so much? It was just a routine investigation into a casual accident. What the hell. Still, they might get curious and push it some.

Barbra Streisand sang "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" Mullica refilled his glass.

If they were curious, how long would curiosity persist? Selmon hadn't been shot, or robbed, or hit behind the ear. All he was, really, was one of what had to be thousands of perfectly settled-down citizens who had chopped themselves free of something in their pasts that might make them unemployable. It seemed to Mullica that in a society where a high school marijuana bust or a college Red affiliation could haunt you to your grave, a lot of that had to be going on. Once you had figured a way of getting a set of papers in a new name — crime novels were full of ways that worked — you rarely had to stand up to a real bedrock investigation. Ordinarily they didn't check your identity; just your identity's credit.

The wife. Selmon's wife. Would he have talked to her? Would he have told this woman he was Engineering Officer Selmon, and that Navigator Arvan lived right up the tracks?

Well, did Margery have any inkling that Engineering Officer Selmon was riding the train with Navigator Arvan? And if she did, could she put a face to either name? No, Mullica shook his head, it was Jack Mullica that Margery knew dangerous things about.

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Barbra Streisand sang "Soon It's Gonna Rain."

Mullica swallowed, and the cold, sweet scotch made his palate tingle. He refilled his glass.

Out beyond the elms and the floodlit, strut-supported balls of the Lindheimer Observatory on the Northwestern University lakefront campus were stars whose names he did not know in constellations he had never learned. From where Arvan sat now, he could see that the Shield-maiden was as lanky as a *Vogue* model, and the Howler's paws were awkwardly placed. All of those suns blazing in the night out there had names and catalog numbers in the local astronomy tables, but he had never learned them, except for the little bits that everyone knew. He knew the Big Dipper, and he knew how to find what they called Polaris. But let the locals come and wring him for how to find the places of his folk. If they ever became aware enough to do that, let them also learn to translate.

Jack Mullica felt that he looked out into the night sky only at controlled times.

Who said there was even a Mrs. Selmon? Would a married Selmon have moved so easily from Oakland just like that? Oh hell, he'd even said he was alone in Oakland, hadn't he? — and the Selmon trying to make himself invisible on Loop CTA platforms didn't then seem the type to go courting around here.

Funny how the mind had registered that and yet not registered it. Face it, it was only because Mullica was married, of all unlikely things, that he had put his mind on that track. He couldn't imagine how one of them could get married except under the most extraordinary circumstances. It was funny the tricks your mind could play. . . . Oh shit! Eikmo was married, too! — Eikmo and his fish-store lady — Mullica, what the hell good does your mind do you? But the important thing was, they were probably in the clear — Navigator Arvan, and Hanig Eikmo, and Ditlo Ravashan, all three. Ravashan, he thought, would be in the clear in a cage full of tigers.

Barbra Streisand sang "Happy Days Are Here Again."

Still, he thought briefly of taking a personal ad in the Denver and San Francisco papers. "Olir Selmon RIP Chicagoland. All O.K. Dwuord Arvan." Something like that.

But when he thought about it some more, his lips and the tip of his nose pleasantly numb, it became clear that he was playing with his mind again. All he was trying to do was give the poor bastard an obituary notice, and none of them could have that.

He could point a high-frequency antenna upward and broadcast the news; all he had to do was go to Radio Shack and buy the hardware, with a

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promise to apply for the FCC license. And then, if there happened to be somebody along the line of transmission, it might be one of his people who heard it, instead of a Methane-Breather or a local in the local "space program" monitoring a local satellite.

No, it was going to happen to each of them, in its own time, silently far from home and in a land of cool-blooded foreigners.

Poor clumsy bastard. Engineering-trades graduate. Exploration volunteer, parents living at last report, farm boy originally — didn't like shoveling manure, one would guess, and turned his mind to ways of getting out of it. If you weren't in one of the Academies, the only way to make officer status and then to have some hope of getting up the promotion ladder was to go the route they'd all gone. And the bonus pay made a difference. But you didn't have much to talk about in letters home from the slick, modern metropolitan training center to the rural little outpost of your birth. Still, the parents were there at the graduation ceremony. Stolid folk with callused hands, their eyes wet and alive in the lights from the podium where you came up in your brand-new dress reds and held out your hand for the certificate. And now he was an accident among people who couldn't ship the body home.

Well, have another scotch alcohol, Jack Mullica, he said to himself, and turned up the light beside his chair.

Margery came home about eight o'clock. She was a good-looking, slim, long-legged frosted brunette — just past forty, but didn't look it, pointy-breasted — and she seemed a little flushed and swollen lipped. She found Mullica sitting in the den with glossy photographs of a car model line spread on his desk beside the rocks glass.

"Hello. Did you eat?" she asked.

"I thawed something. You?"

"I'll make a hamburger, I guess. See the paper?"

"Read it on the train."

"They found something in the bog near where you first turned up."

"I saw that." He looked at her and let his smile widen crazily. "It's a piece of flying saucer, all right. For you see, darling, as I slip off this outer skin, you will know that you have come to love a being from another Solar System."

She snorted. "Oh God." She came forward and tousled his hair. "I do love you, you know," she said fondly. "I really do." She raised an eyebrow, then looked at the pictures on his desk and the blank piece of paper in his typewriter. "Will you be up late?"

He nodded. "Detroit's having a rash of midyear models. Low-displacement engines, stick shifts, high rear-axle ratios. Arab-fighter product. Won't

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carry luggage, won't climb a hill, but we'll talk gas mileage. Detroit wants all the stops out with the local press; I've got to flange up some release copy here, and start planning a junket out to a test track. Be in bed about midnight, I guess."

"All right. I'll watch TV for a while and go to sleep."

"Fine."

She stayed in the doorway for a moment. "When will the press conference be?"

"Soon. Has to be, if it's going to do any good for the summer. Do it up at Lake Geneva, probably — Playboy Hotel." He looked down at his hands. "Be gone four, five days. Finish up on a Friday." He waited.

She said: "I asked because Sally and I were talking about going out to Arizona to that ranch she talks about. If you were going to be out of town anyway, that would be —"

"A good time for it. Right. I'll let you know as soon as we have firm dates."

She'd look good in tight jeans and a Western shirt. Not as good as she'd have looked in her twenties, but there was a limit to how soon promotional copywriting could lead a man's wife into the habits of affluence. And it was immaterial how she might look in a Playboy Club hotel room on a Friday night with a good week's work under your belt. "Good night. See you in the morning," he said.

"'Night." When she turned to go, he could see that her petticoat was twisted under her tailored black skirt, and the eyelet at the top of her zipper was unhooked at her neck. Her gleaming hair almost hid that.

He had met Margery's only woman friend, Sally. She was all right — a steady-eyed keypunch-pool supervisor with a four-martini voice — and she was the type who always returned favors. Sally had a lot of contacts, a busy social schedule, and a life plan that wasn't anything Margery couldn't cover for her with a few alibi phone calls to Sally's various fiancés and good friends.

He went back to culling together specifications and making notes on a scratch pad. After a while he turned to his typewriter and wrote: "Sporty but thrifty, the exciting new midyear XF-1000 GT features the proven in-line 240-C.I.D. six-cylinder Milemiser engine with. . . ."

With what? With the simple fuel-saving carburetor and the uneven mixture distribution in the intake manifold, or with the Space Age solid-state ignition that was the only thing that let the engine run at all with all those emission controls fucking over the power curve? He frowned and decided to list the electronics ahead of the single barrel; after a tongueful like Milemiser, you wanted to come back fast with something sexy.

He went on with his work. He concentrated on being the best there

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was in Chicago. In his trade, the name of Jack Mullica meant something.

"Designed to take the Chicagoland family to even the most far-flung summer destination with a minimum of fuel cost, the XF-1000 GT's comfort features sacrifice nothing. . . ."

THE RATIONALE*

WE DON'T retrieve people. It's a good policy. You have to assume the down vehicle was being tracked. If another one now goes in after it, you're liable to lose both. There are things that happen to delay the locals — your grounding field disables their spark-gap engine-ignition systems and often knocks out utility power. But if you then go ahead and lay a lot of additional technology on the locals to hold them back beyond that, that could escalate on you.

Once you've gotten that tough, you might as well start in with your armed landing parties, your bridgeheads, garrisons, embassies or armies of occupation or both, and the next thing you know, the Methane-Breathers want Jupiter, to "maintain the balance of power." And for what? What's the power?

These people have nothing for us except potential. Someday, yes, they're going to be valuable, and that's why the Methane-Breathers keep hanging around, too, refilling their air tanks in the petroleum swamps at night and making funny lights when they're not careful. This is going to be a highly civilized manufacturing center someday, with factories all over the asteroid belt and on some of the bigger natural satellites, like the Moon, that'll have really significant installations. There'll be freighters and businessmen coming and going. Once you start getting that kind of traffic, you almost have to have a dockyard and maybe an actual military base — the Moon would be good for that, too — to keep a little order. There's always maintenance and repair work to be done, and there's always contraband to check for.

I keep thinking how cannabis will grow almost anywhere; one shipload of seed could make you a fortune in half a dozen places I can think of, and I don't even have a criminal mind. But the minute that kind of thing starts, you're into a commerce-regulating and immigration-service kind of thing, and that's armed vehicles and men. That disturbs the Methane-Breathers, and it would disturb me if I were they. It's too easy to call a

**Beginning the night he wrote the XF-1000 GT story for the press kit, Jack Mullica began sleeping badly and mumbling into his pillow. A few clear sounds emerged. None were comprehensible.*

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battleship just a coast-guard cutter, and a regiment an inspection team. And there you go again; next thing, you've got two fleets eyeball-to-eyeball. And that stinks: anytime you get the career armed services faced off, you're going to get actions in aid of prestige. That produces debris.

And that's apart from the fact that if the locals get on to you and resent you, you're into a big thing with them. A slug-thrower may not kill you as elegantly as a laser, but it will kill you, and these locals also have lasers. And fission and fusion and demonstrated willingness.

Then there's the fact that the tactical position of a planet-sited military force fighting off an attempted landing from space is both hopeless and unbeatable. They can't do much to you while you're aloft, but the moment you start landing, they can lob all sorts of stuff at you from too many places to suppress. If you keep coming, they throw more. Pretty soon what you're trying to land on can't be lived in. It's no good to them anymore, either, but that scores no points for you.

The same sort of thing applies if you try to destroy their military resources beforehand. At about the point where their industries might be worth taking over, locals are generally in possession of a well-dispersed, well-dug-in arsenal. That's a lot of firepower, and it takes tons more to knock out a ton of it. If we could afford to bring that much suppression to someplace out on the ass end of nowhere, we wouldn't need their damned industry in the first place.

So we don't shoot. That leaves you two alternatives. One is to poison them off — short-lived radioactives, or biologicals. Could be done, no problem with the delivery systems. Then you've got a lot of real estate, free for the burying of an entire ecological system, including the management and the work force you thought was going to sell you the produce of the factories. What you've got for your efforts is something that's turning hand over fist into a planetary desert. Thank you very much. And I, for one, would keep looking over my shoulder, and hearing whispers.

The only choice, really, is the one we make. You hang around as inconspicuously as possible, learning as much as you can from listening to and watching their electronics and so forth. You can learn a lot, by direct observation and by inference. Any intelligent race you can hope to someday relate to is going to have come up essentially the same developmental roads and dealt with the physical laws of the Universe in about the same way. So you keep tabs on them until they come out to meet you; then you can sit down right away and work things out, draw up your contracts.

If they're Methane-Breather types, of course, that's one thing; that's

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strictly business, and no hanging out together after working hours. If they're anthropomorphic, that's another, and welcome, brethren, into the family of spacefaring, oxygen-breathing, aspiring intelligent life —granted that's truer if it doesn't nauseate us to look at you. You also want to consider there's a lot of evidence — they say — that both the Methane-Breathers and we have found traces of some other types nosing around our corner of the Galaxy. Under those circumstances, everybody wants to be as friendly and businesslike as possible with anybody that'll have you. It could be a funny feeling to be trying to go it alone while something really exotic was undermining your back fences.

So we don't retrieve people. If something loud got triggered-off in the process, it would upset too many future arrangements. We're a pretty self-reliant kind of animal, and we also take our service oaths seriously. We knew all the possibilities before we were assigned. And, besides, hardly anything ever goes wrong.

ABOUT THE CHAPLAIN

WELL, SOMETIMES you get catastrophic failures. You're working off a propulsion system than can get crosswise of a planet's magnetic field in a hurry if things go out of kilter back among the rectifiers and sorkin felkers in the mome-divider, and the most common type of failure produces a high-speed fireball that disintegrates before it hits the ground.

There was a scandal about that; some clown approved an engine design that was cheaper, easier on fuel, and, it turned out, an almost certain time bomb. It produced a mass display over the southwestern United States that they're still talking about. They claimed later they'd gotten the bugs out of it with a few modifications, but once, driving up the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut in the middle of the night, I actually saw one go up like that — brilliant and green as hell, from the copper in the hull alloy burning in contact with the air. I think they'd better put out another set of modifications.

But every so often, you just hit a snag, so to speak, and that's what happened to us. So instead of working to keep you aloft at a controlled speed, the energy gets trapped inside the system, and things start to soften and drip, and it gets pretty warm in the cabin.

Ravashan grunted and began hitting switches. Hanig turned up the cabin coolers and began clearing his side of the instrument board. I picked up the communicator and yelled to Selmon to hurry up and get the after bulkhead hatch shut, and never mind trying to get to the engine-compartment controls. He was searing his hands on the hatch

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coaming; how did he expect to work the engines — with potholders? A big gob of stuff came roaring and spitting out from the blazing light beyond the hatch before he got it shut, and I put out the standard distress call.

It's all drilled into us, the entire procedure. Except for Ravashan, who had a choice between killing the engines or trying to get enough ergs out of them to land this beast, none of us had any optional moves. Unless it was the chaplain. He was staring directly back into my eyes in horror, and he was dealing with the fact that the half-molten transformer array that had come in from the engine room had hit him in the lower belly as he sat there. But none of us had the option of helping him.

I reported five men and one reconnaissance coracle with critical engine trouble over the U.S. Eastern Seaboard, took one glance at the engine-temperature repeaters, and added a note about no expectation of recovering control; gave the altitude, present course and speed, one crewman injured, no detectable local traffic; saw that Ravashan was heading us for the one black area in the seaboard's endless swath of light, reported that we were attempting to set down in a suggested emergency ditching area and gave its code name; and kissed my ass good-bye.

Selmon finished beating at the hatch clamps and threw himself into his chair, blowing blindly on his hands while he stared out forward over Ravashan's shoulder. I reached over and fastened his crash straps for him, and cranked our two chairs into the three-quarter angle prescribed in the hard-landing procedures manual. He and I were the two spectators. The chaplain was moaning down at his lap, which was fountaining little popping globules of flame and swirls of soot for an instant before he got to the chair-arm toggle that released his fire extinguisher, and then he was wrapped in a pressure-foamed cocoon of yellowish white gel. He looked like a monster, writhing against his straps in there.

Selmon and I watched Ravashan and Eikmo perform. I had always thought they were pretty good, for mustang officers. But I had never seen them work for their lives before. They danced fingertip ballets on their controls — Ravashan slapped Hanig's hand away from a switch once, never missed a beat himself, and then grabbed the copilot's wrist and guided it back to the same switch an instant later — and I knew we were going to live through it.

Even with the smoke and stink, the alarm hooter and the wild yawing of the coracle, I had time to regret it for a moment. When you're young and you suddenly have that big block of time ahead of you to fill, drastic solutions have a certain appeal. But that's a transitory feeling that occurs only in the rational part of your mind; the animal wants to live.

Then you start worrying about being hurt in some serious way. There's only so much your survival kit can do for you. Unfortunately, from what

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we knew of the local culture, that was as much as their medicine could do, either. They knew how to prevent sepsis, how to set bones, and how to bypass damaged organs. And they knew immunology and antibiosis. That about summed it up. They couldn't regenerate destroyed organs, and all they could do for motor-nerve damage — a lacerated spinal cord, say —was to make you comfortable as much as possible.

But that was all fantasy anyway. It was a worry your mind gave you to help you ignore the possibility of outright death; it was an attempt to comfort yourself.

And then I remembered that one of us really was crippled.

It made no difference what I was thinking. Ravashan was setting us down almost as gently as a baby's kiss, sideslipping in over a bunch of scrub pines, using the cushion of some thick brush to take more of the speed off, and then down into some sort of body of shallow water hemmed in by bushes. We skipped once, snapping and drumming inside, bottomed on the mud with brown water and bits of vegetation and a smashed turtle foaming back over the viewport, swirled around in concentric spirals that threw up one last big sheet of liquid mud, and came to a crumpled stop with the radar altimeter still going ka-blip . . . ka-blip . . . ka-blip! until Hanig Eikmo sighed and shut it down. The crew compartment had passed its crashworthiness test as advertised. "Well, gentlemen," Ravashan said in what I thought at the time was a pretty good American accent, "welcome to your new home."

What you want in that kind of situation is speed.

Ditching areas are preselected and coded for what we call min-time; a computer-calculated optimum average of the length of time it should take for a critical-sized team of locals to get to the impact site. Critical size is defined in numbers — three — and weight; one law-enforcement person, which is anyone in any uniform, equals three civilians. You have to assume a group of three will be able to contact reinforcements while making enough trouble to distract you, unless you act fast.

And there were other factors. There was a lot of air traffic in the area, even though the Friendship and Dulles patterns barely existed yet, and even what they were then calling Idlewild was almost brand-new. They had a pretty comprehensive air-traffic-control system, most of it radarized, and there was military air at Atlantic City, and at Floyd Bennett and Mitchell on Long Island. I don't think McGuire AFB existed yet.

It wasn't like it would be a few years later, when the SAC and NORAD systems got into full bloom, but it was good enough; they'd seen us, for sure. They nearly always see us — our radar-search receivers tell us that — but all their systems have to be designed for tracking air-breathing

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aircraft or ballistic missiles, and our maneuvering styles slip us off and on their screens in ways they can't really read. Still, this time it was a question of how far down they'd been able to follow us before ground return scrambled up their scopes, and how soon they'd get a search organized if they came to a decision that this time it might be worth it.

Anyway, min-time was short. We melted hell out of the controls, vaporized our charts and data storage, carved off peripheral structures and undermined the hull with lasers set at emergency overload, and tossed the guns into the bog when they got too hot to hold. They went off like small depth bombs, shattering from thermal shock as they hit the cold water.

All of that was in the procedures manual, too, and it worked like a charm. Four of us stood on some sort of clay dike overlooking a cranberry bog, with nothing but our iron rations, our survival kits, fatigue coveralls, and sweat on our faces. The guns were scattered chunks of crystal, aluminum hydroxide, and copper sulfate. The pressure hull was twenty feet down, already full of silt. The stars shone on unruffled water and four wet, muddy men full of adrenaline and ignorance.

Atop the dike the chaplain lay wordlessly on his back. Trying to fathom his injuries, we had peeled off the gel and dropped it in the water to dissolve. Ravashan had given him some tablets of painkiller — not too many — and cut away some of his half-melted coverall below the waist. But a lot of it had amalgamated into his muscle and sinew. I remember his feet jerked constantly, and his heels drummed against the ground.

I stared into Ravashan's face. Ravashan looked back at me, at Selmon, and at Eikmo. "I'll take him with me," he said.

I saw the look cross Selmon's and Eikmo's faces. How far and how long would even Ditlo Ravashan carry a dead weight?

But now we didn't have to.

The chaplain lay there, his lips moving. His name was Inava Joro, and he was about my father's age. He had done his job all during the long hours and days of our flight, keeping our heads straight, doing his best to moderate the tensions that build up among aggressive, apprehensive, finely honed young men locked up elbow to elbow in a barrel swirling toward unfriendly shores. You can't assign a woman, or even four women, to our kind of crew. That's been tried, and it turns into a zoo. And then a madhouse. So they put a little something in the food, and they do a chaplain to be a sort of umpire — a neutral party among the crew; someone who speaks and listens, and is never one of you.

I couldn't hear what he might be saying to himself. Ravashan said: "Well, Navigator?" We were running out of min-time.

I glanced up at the stars for the last time in my official capacity. A thing that's hard for locals to understand is that the constellations are

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composed of stars that are, generally, so far away that with a few distortions, it tends to look almost the same — but wrong — from almost any planet we or the Methane-Breathers know about. When you're in flight, of course, you get the tachyon-inversion effects beyond C velocity, so constellations are of purely academic interest to a navigator until he gets near dirt. But I knew enough to jerk my thumb over my shoulder. "That's west," I said, and we all said "Good luck" to each other in our native language, and dispersed, each mumbling something to the chaplain as we turned our backs. Ravashan was squatted down to pick him up.

The procedures were fixed and conditioned into us. A crew must destroy what it can of its vessel and conceal the rest. Complete destruction depends on making a certain cross-connection in the engines, and that had been forestalled, but we'd done well enough. Then, after concealment, you take no artifacts with you but your rations and your survival kit, which are designed to look the way you'd expect packaged stuff to look. On our mission the food said Nestle's and Borden's on the wrappers, and the survival kit was a blue-and-white box that said Johnson & Johnson, although there wasn't any fine print, and none of them were duplicates of what you'd see in a store. And then you scatter, and make absolutely no attempt to ever be seen with another member of your race again.

Ravashan put the chaplain over his shoulder and moved off eastward. The chaplain's head lolled. Then he raised it briefly, and moved one arm as if he were waving.

Eikmo, Selmon, and I fanned out, the angles of our separate paths diverging, the whole nighted continent ahead of us. I moved generally westward, and after a while I couldn't hear anyone else. I heard forest noises I assumed were normal, and I heard my breathing.

You go on your own. For one thing, if the locals get onto you, you're going to be interrogated and maybe vivisected. That would put a crimp in any plans you might have for remaining in charge of your life. You can probably pass for a slightly off-brand local if you're alone; get together in a bunch, and it draws attention to little peculiarities that were going disregarded. So it's common sense, and it's in the service oath, too.

There's the catalyst phenomenon. In the Recon Service, you're usually dealing with locals who are right on the brink of going off-planet. There's a good possibility you might give them technology they can replicate. Suppose some bright local figures out the principles behind one of the artifacts they drag out of your knowledge. Maybe he had some ideas of his own to add to what he learns. Then he comes up with some unique development your own people never thought of. That kind of thing can land right between your eyes, or, if they start building ships that will go faster than C, right up your family's whatsis.

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By and large, it would make more sense if the services issued plain instructions to commit suicide in some way that disintegrated everything, and when you think about it, they come as close to that as they can. But if they made it an order, who would sign for it? Who'd contract-up the recon jobs? So they brief us well, drill us in the procedures, and, no doubt, hope very hard for whatever it is you'd hope for if you were in charge of the big picture.

And of course there's always your hope that you'll outlive the situation — that someday, when the papers are being signed in United Nations Plaza or Red Square or that big plot of ground in Peking, or whatever . . . well, Peking would be awkward if you didn't have the epicanthic fold around your eyes, which most of us don't . . . anyway, there'd suddenly be these two or three individuals in the surrounding crowd who'd push forward and start speaking in tongues.

But this is not a realistic hope. We don't exactly gather in new planets every year; it hasn't happened in my lifetime, and at the turn into the 1950s, it seemed to me these particular people were being damned slow about qualifying.

Moon rockets don't count. That's all chemical stuff; it's like firing yourself out of a cannon. The circus crowd applauds, but it's just a piece of entertainment. Of course, Neil Armstrong and his cohorts are much braver men than I am. They have to be, to chance it in those getups. But none of us — not even poor, lonely Selmon, who actually knew something about what goes on inside a starfaring engine — are going to try to help with that.

I guess it was different in the old days here, when what you had was some finder crew stumbling into a place that was still hundreds of generations away from being ripe. It's against procedure, and it's not something you'll find recognized in the offical histories, but everybody knows a certain amount of hanky-panky goes on under those circumstances. The only people who'll be finders are the kind of people who'd rub themselves raw against the rules and constraints of civilization. That's why they can fly without destinations, hoping to turn up useful planets before they trip on a black hole or their toilets go into reverse. The bounty for finding a likely world is enough to suit most independent life-styles, but sometimes there just has to be a temptation to stay and do magic for the savages.

Well, what the hell; it must be fun being a god, and it isn't going to do a lot of harm to run off a few simple tricks for the admiring multitude in some simple corner of the world. Might even kick 'em a few steps up the ladder, though it's amazing how self-perpetuating ignorance is. Sowing a few judicious hints at that stage might even be all to the good, if it's done

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discreetly. But if I read the local books correctly, some of those early boys got a little out of hand. I think they attracted the fuzz and got dragged away to a reward they hadn't counted on. And it's different now; these people really are on the brink, and if I screwed things up at this critical point, you'd find my name in the books, and featured where my family and my family's friends could find it offhand. There wouldn't be much point in my going home by that route.

So we went our separate ways. I followed the dike at first, keeping my footing as best I could in the starlight. The dike and the bog terrain petered out into rising ground that was loose underfoot and difficult walking. This country was sand with a thin top layer of rotting needles and leaves. Nothing tall or sturdy could grow in it. I was constantly pulling my coveralls through underbrush and getting smeared with sap from trash pines. I wasn't sure what it was or what it might be doing to me; it smelled corrosive and felt as though it might never come off. Eventually I turned onto a crude road, keeping my eyes out for lights, listening for voices and motor noises. All I heard were insects, and I saw nothing.

The road was narrow — two ruts and a weedy strip between them. Underbrush encroached on it. It was better than the woods for forward progress, and the soil was so loose I couldn't be backtracked, so I stayed on it and didn't try to check whether I was really still headed west. I was still numb. Not much time ago, I'd been an ultracivilized man cruising airily over the patchwork lights and distorted broadcast voices of promising but unpolished folk. Now I tripped over things in the dark and wanted my mommy. I practiced my American. I said into the dark: "Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing."

NOTE ON DOTHAN STABLITS

GOULDVILLE, IN northern Indiana, is the sort of city reached by driving over railroad grade crossings. Dothan Stablits has been chief of police there since 1974, in charge of a department of about 85 persons. In his dozen or more years of service, Chief Stablits has given the citizens of Gouldville no actionable reason to feel dissatisfied with his department, and he has been circumspect with and trustworthy to the other municipal authorities.

Stablits is a rawboned, awkwardly constituted, very large middle-aged man with a jutting jaw, slate-blue eyes, and sparse black hair. He has a tendency to stay on his feet and grip things with his gnarled hands — the back of a chair, by preference — as he speaks to visitors asking questions in his small, orderly office. He stands behind his chair, in constant incomplete motion, as if trying to find exactly the proper location to push

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the chair into but not sure it's not already in the right place. He chooses his words with the same sort of effect:

I was never — I never thought I'd get into enforcement work. Law enforcement. I come from Mennonite people, you know, from around Millersburg and Honeyville. Farmers; always been farmers. There's Stablitses living on their farms yet in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. There we're Plattdeutsch — what they call Pennsylvania Dutch. We don't believe in engine-powered machinery, would you believe it, and the best job I had before I went on the cops was driving a gasoline tanker for Standard Oil of Indiana.

I was — I don't know, I was never the kind of person who sits down and says: Here I am; here's where I want to be; this is what I'll do. I've moved around a lot. I'm not the kind of person who says: I don't understand it, so I won't look at it; I'll never do it. A lot of us — there's just so much land, you know, and there's always a lot of brothers and sisters — there's no room on the place to feed us; a lot of us had to get jobs, and in the way it worked out later, most of your RVs —your travel trailers and pickup-truck camper inserts, your motor homes, your recreational vehicles — was Mennonite-built in factories all over this part of the state. The women would sew the curtains and make the cushions, and the men would be the cabinetmakers and bodybuilders. And every once in a while, when the elders weren't looking, some of the younger men would run a forklift in the lumber shed or actually go out on the road with a unit for a test run. Well, you know, you do that kind of thing when you're young. Then you get older. I think maybe most of the elders know all about that. They see, but they don't say, because they know everybody gets older.

I was — well, I was taken with this one girl. And she went to Chicago; her aunt there died, and her uncle needed somebody to cook and clean; he was old. I went and looked for work up there so I could live and call on her. Well, the uncle died, and it came out at the wake that she was expecting.

Then she had — she got the idea to be a barmaid. There are people who will get into that because they can sleep while the kid is in the daycare, and work while the kid is sleeping. And there are then people who will like that kind of life, and I have never seen one of those change away from it until they got too crippled up for the action. So I went on the Chicago P.D. with a fellow I met delivering gasoline in the middle of the night. But that was no work for me; it was in the Summerdale District — maybe you heard about that — and I quit there before that burglar testified and it all blew up. I went to Shoreview, the next town, because they were making a lot of sergeants up there fast, and I liked the work, basically. I still like it. It's good.

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I, well, I was getting along, and this guy went down on the CTA tracks. I have to tell you, I worried about that. But I couldn't handle — I couldn't get a handle on it. There was — well, look, it's not like Sherlock Holmes. I have never seen a case solved yet by adding up all the clues and dividing by logic. You don't say "solved." You say "cleared." You don't say "clue." You say "lead" — you get a lead to somebody who saw something, or heard something, and you get that person to tell you what they saw or heard in such a way that it gives you the next lead. And I couldn't get any. But —but I knew — I know to this day — there're leads out there somewhere.

Are you trying to tell me the man fell? Then he fell when there were still people around who had been on the train with him. If they were within a hundred yards, they must have seen something; I mean, there's a flash, and there's noise. Where are they? Or else he waited until they were a ways off.

Do you want me to think he was a jumper? What the dickens did he go all the way up to Borrow Street to jump for? Was he trying to leave a message for somebody lived around there — "See what you made me do?" Then where is that person?

Was he pushed? Then that person knows what happened. He remembers. He could tell me. Or he could tell somebody. You don't forget a thing like that; it lives in you. It makes you move in ways different from the way you'd move if it had never happened. Little ways, maybe, at first. But they add up, and someday you put your feet entirely different from how you would have if you hadn't pushed him. And that will be a lead. Anybody knows me, knows I can wait a long time for a lead.

At this point, Chief Stablits shrugs and looks around his office as if discovering it were some other room; his arms rise and fall; his hands slap his thighs.

But there's just so long you can keep a file active when your commander says it was just some guy on the tracks; it wasn't dope or bets or the Mafia. It's not something the city manager's going to feel heat; the town's going to the dogs; do something. And there's just so much time in a day, and sometimes these things can take years . . . well, a lot of them never come to anything, really — you can't be sure; they could just as lief pop open on you; I have to admit that. But you can't hang your hat on it. And one day there's a letter from here, from Gouldville. It's the town council; they say they're looking for a new chief, and I've been recommended. Well, there's the pay, and there's being the commander, and, tell you the truth, there's the getting away from the man on the tracks and all the other open files. So I came here and talked to them, and I got hired.

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Do I wonder how they got my name, in particular? You mean, why would they write to a sergeant in Shoreview, in particular? No, there's nothing to wonder about that. They had a list made up by this company, and I was on it; that's all. Yeah, it took me off that case; it took me off a lot of cases.

He pushes the chair to a new place, and shortly thereafter the interview is over.

Stablits's name did indeed appear on a list prepared by an employment search agency specializing in municipal positions. A similar list was furnished to a number of other communities within reasonable distance of Shoreview. The list was accompanied by brief dossiers on the subject individuals. It was sent to every community with a high-rank opening in its police department, and Stablits's is the best dossier in every instance. It is also the only one common to all the lists, which contained no other duplications. I have been able to establish this much by examination of records stored by those municipalities.

The lists were volunteered. The firm had not been contacted, but apparently had some means of compiling a roster of openings. The firm was not one of the leading agencies specializing in this sort of work, and has long since gone out of business without a trace. And therefore, there is no way to tie it back to whoever is behind the National Register of Pathological Anomalies.

— A.B.

DITLO RAVASHAN'S STATEMENT ON EVENTS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE CRASH

I AM Ditlo Ravashan. On the night in question, I succeeded in making a forced landing in the New Jersey cranberry swamps. With me were Hanig Eikmo, Olir Selmon, Dwourd Arvan, and Inava Joro. Joro was severely wounded by the engine breakup; the others sustained no wounds.

After we had disposed of the ship, we set out in different directions, and I did not ever see my crewmen again. I carried Joro for a time, but he was getting worse and worse despite everything I could do for him, and shortly he died.

I buried the body deep, and not even I could find it again. It has never been found. I managed to reach a highway, and in due course was able to hitch a ride to Atlantic City Naval Air Station, where I entered the service of the United States, to which I have been completely loyal from that day to this.

This is a true and accurate account, and it is complete.

— Ditlo Ravashan

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* * *

A TRUE AND ACCURATE, COMPLETE ACCOUNT BY DITLO RAVASHAN FOR HIS OWN FILES

UNLIKE THE others, I had an exact idea of where I was, and a fair outline of what I would do if possible. I waited until the other three had gotten over their first confusion, waiting as usual with perfect patience, since it cost me nothing, and after a time the three of them set out in different directions, as they had been taught.

Once we had parted company, I moved off in the direction of a two-lane highway, carrying Joro for a time. I remember that, except for Joro's incessant moaning, the night was still and clear. "I don't — don't think I can — stand the pain!" he said at one point. What did he expect that to do — make the pain go away? In truth, I had been sick and tired of him since considerably before the crash. I would certainly have left him — would have never picked him up in the first place — but he was needful for my plan, and so I carried him patiently. But after a time, I laid him down, for his gasps had grown both shallower and more frequent, and it was obvious that soon I would be alone.

Joro lay staring blindly up at me, his hands hugging his belly. "What's going to become of me?" he asked.

"Chaplain," I said, "you're going to die. If I had all of a military hospital here to help, I think you'd still die. And that's the truth."

"But I don't want to —"

"Chaplain, you have the choice between going down a whimpering, puling babe, or dying like a man. That's your only choice."

"Oh, Ravashan, why — why did we come all this way?"

"Chaplain, we really don't have time for this. Be useful. There is a question I hope you can answer."

"Wh — What do you want to know?"

"What is the meaning of life?"

"Wh —" He did not answer at first, so I struck him lightly in the face.

"Chaplain Joro."

He stopped his moaning, but did not otherwise respond. I struck him a little harder. "Chaplain. Answer the question."

Joro looked at me, and it seemed some sort of remission was temporarily taking place, for his breathing steadied for a moment. "Ravashan," Joro said. "You're crazy."

"Chaplain, there is nothing I or anyone else can do for you. You *are* dying. Tell me, if you can, the meaning of life." I struck him again, but all he did was weep.

"Ssss. . . ." His eyes had closed, and his head drooped. I struck him again.

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"Chaplain — what *is* the meaning of life? Do you hear me? What is the meaning of life?" I crouched over him in the darkness, repeating the question tirelessly, but all he said was, "Hurt —", and then he lapsed into incoherent gibberish until he died.

Somehow the night did seem a little more alien with him gone, for a moment or two. But I was . . . buttering no parsnips . . . where I was, and I wanted to be far away from the swamp by the time dawn occured. so I shouldered my burden — it was a dead weight now, but on the other hand, it was quiet — and in due course found the highway, a clear cut through the countryside, with soft shoulders. There was no appreciable light, but there were stars, and by the stars, I could tell that I had happened upon country in transition from the bogs and trees to bulrushes. I was not really near the coast as yet, but I could expect estuaries, and creeks running to meet them.

The highway was deserted. Well, at that time of the morning, it would be, for the most part. But somebody was bound to come along. I set Joro down on the shoulder and waited.

I remember what I thought. Two things, leading up to a third:

From time to time, birds went by overhead, on their own errands. Birds as such were not known on my home world, though they were on some others — including this one, obviously. We had, instead, creatures that navigated the air using the displacement of their bodies, distended by digestive gases. These were capable of a slow sort of dirigibility, enough to eat seeds and insects, and, at the higher end of the chain, predatory types that ate lesser flying creatures. So they served the same purpose.

I have heard it said that the lack of birds on my home world can be explained by the fact that birds are actually descended from dinosaurs, or the equivalent. And dinosaurs, or the equivalent, were unknown to my people's paleontology. The theory is that *we* are the dinosaurs — that in due course, we shall devolve into birds. So I followed the flight of these terrestrial birds with some interest.

I watched the man-made air traffic, too, wondering if they were attempting a search for us. But I noticed nothing concentrating on the swamp. In fact, I noticed nothing out of the ordinary: propeller planes, almost exclusively, and mostly commercial, judging by their height and size. One or two jets went by overhead; those were military, but none of them showed any interest in my particular part of the darkness below them.

And the upshot of these thoughts, for what it's worth, was that this was a relatively primitive world, and so I was comapratively safe from anything the natives might do. And at the same time, it was a world sufficiently advanced for me to enjoy myself upon it. I was not at all sure

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that I would have been as happy on my own world, all things considered. There were quite a few Ditlo Ravashans back there. Here there was only one, and I was he, and this planet would support me in the style to which I intended to become accustomed. It was not an unpleasant thought.

After a while the lights of a car began to glow in the distance, and I stepped out onto the road. I reckoned that a uniformed man, which I was, so soon after the war, in trouble — which I was — would be able to flag down most forms of transportation. I was almost wrong, as it turned out. The car swerved and slid, and almost made it around me, in which case it might have sped up again and gone, but in the end, it did stop, and the driver rolled down his window and poked a pale and bewildered face at me. "Wha — what do you want?" he said in a breathless and slightly drunken voice.

He was a middle-aged man, with his tie undone, who was probably returning home to wife and children after a night partly spent with another woman. There was a smell to him of cheap perfume, and there was lipstick on his left ear. And he could not make up his mind about me, as I suspected he could not make up his mind about many other things as well.

I said, as he looked at me with his mouth slightly open and his eyes trying for sharper focus: "Get me to Atlantic City Naval Air Station as fast as you can. My buddy's hurt bad." I said it just like that, and if my accent wasn't quite right, my uniform wasn't, either; it was just a coverall with a couple of badges sewn on. But I didn't expect either one of these things to give me trouble with this man, and they didn't.

He demurred only about the destination. He looked for a moment at Joro, lying huddled on the shoulder, a dim figure in the backscatter from the headlights, and said, "But there's lots of places closer than Atlantic City."

Not with military personnel. Not that I knew of. "Atlantic City is where we have to go."

"Well, all right; I was just —" But I was gone away from his window, opening his offside door, wrestling Joro into the backseat, and settled in beside the driver, before he could complete the thought. And if he was a little amazed at how fast I did all that, he did not speak of it. He craned his neck to look at Joro again, and I said, "Let's go."

He nodded uncertainly, but put the car in gear and began climbing up the ladder of speeds until he had the car up to highway velocity. "You got it," he said, having decided that, really, it was all his idea.

It was too much to hope, of course, that the Earthman would just drive and do his job. He was a man who thought of himself as being different from other men because he had a woman on the side, and he was a man

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who, underneath that, realized that he was overweight and overage and not especially lovely to look at, so that some small but vital part of him knew that his woman on the side was either deperate or playing him for a fool, or perhaps both; therefore he actually got no pleasure from his pleasure. So every opportunity to open up his life, to give it meaning and texture, was, necessarily, exploited. So about ten minutes into it, he began talking. "Can't get much more than seventy out of this bucket without goin' all over the road," and, "Boy! Have I got a story to tell my wife!", and similar expressions. Well, Joro wasn't in any kind of a rush, actually. As for the man's wife, whatever he told her wasn't going to be believed. "Your buddy doesn't look too good, what I could see of him. What kind of outfit you in?" was closer to the mark.

"Brazilian Naval Air Force," I said. "We're allies of yours. Night-flying exercise. Couple of things went wrong."

"Oh." There was a pause. "Hadn't you better check on your buddy?"

"My buddy's as all right as he needs to be."

"Oh." More thought. "What about your plane?"

"I know where it is. The naval station will send out a recovery vehicle; have it back at the air station by dawn."

"Oh." I could see him pondering that. The next thing out of his mouth might be, "You know, there's something fishy about this story," so I said: "Sooner we get to the authorities, the better," and he remembered that we were, after all, headed for the authorities. Which meant, I suppose, that no matter how fishy the story, it had the official sanction of the United States government; which meant, since he was too clever to be taken in by it, but it was the story the government wanted told, that he could tell the story without feeling like a fool, and with feeling he was on the inside of something. It never occurred to him, I reckon, that somebody would head to the authorities who didn't belong to the authorities.

We pulled up, finally, at the main gate of the Naval Air Station. It was before you actually got to Atlantic City, on the highway that ran through the cattails, and though the station was off to one side, it was easy enough to direct him to it . . . it was, really, the only thing that looked like a naval station, and one of the few things that were lit up at night.

The gate was a guard shack with the highway dividing to run to either side, and two guards in it, except that they came out, carrying rifles, as the car came toward them, but then turned partway to go back, and yet stopped. The guards looked at us . . . like we had two heads . . . and they pointed their weapons at us.

I reached into the backseat and pulled Joro out. Rigor had set in; he was like a wooden dummy, and very cold to the touch, even though he was at

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the ambient air temperature or even above it. He sprawled on the tarmac, one leg in the air, hands over his belly, and this was the first I'd seen him that way in the light; he was dirty, pieces of foam clung to him, pieces of coverall were blended with scorched flesh, and his mouth was ruined.

The guards were not combat veterans. One of them choked down an outcry. The other reacted to the thump of Joro's body on the tarmac by firing his rifle automatically; that was how I learned the weapons weren't loaded, for all I heard was the click of the firing pin. I turned to the driver of the car. "You can go now." And he did, with one glance at Joro, sick dismay beginning to dawn on his face, backing and filling the car until he could complete turning it around and go, where the first thing he would have to explain to his wife would be the lipstick, which would mean he might never have to explain anything else. I turned to the guards, who were very young. "Let me speak to your commanding officer," I said, and let the military routine take over.

There was a great deal of it, of course, and I did not speak to the commanding officer until I had worked my way up the chain of command. But eventually I spoke to an adjutant, and explained that Joro's body wasn't getting any sweeter-smelling, and at that stage, they put it on ice somewhere. And then I did get to speak to the commanding officer, and explained to him that what he was wanted for was to relay my demand to speak to a government official.

And by then there was enough mystery about me, what with my uniform badges that looked real only at first glance; and my first-aid kit, which had Johnson & Johnson on it, but just wavy lines where smaller letters should go, and only slightly comprehensible things inside; and as luck would have it, spending the night at the naval station was a young congressman who until recently had been in the Navy. They got him up; in truth, he undoubtedly was already up by then, and possibly even had had breakfast, but they told me they got him up, and brought him to my room, with a couple of really armed guards to keep him safe. And so this man who was to be wedded to me in so many ways over the years to come came into the gray room where I sat. He looked at me, and sat down in a chair opposite mine, across the plywood table. He cocked his head and watched me. He did not, at first, speak.

I explained about Joro's body — that it would require a confidential autopsy that would prove my bona fides. The congressman nodded — he was quick, and that was far from the last time he would display that quality — and waved the military personnel out of the room, although they were very uncomfortable with that. I could hardly blame them, but the congressman was right — he was utterly safe from me, because he was

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the key to what I wanted.

I told him what I was. And he believed me. And we worked out a deal, which has been very good for me, and not bad for the congressman, either. An early part of the deal, as we worked it out across the plywood table, was that he would call me by a nickname, and I would call him by a nickname, and avoid what might happen if our real names became known at some time. It was only the first of myriad precautions we would take, in the end. It has been so long now that I have trouble thinking of him as anyone but Yankee. And I think that is for the best.

— Never revealed.

HANIG EIKMO

RETRACING HANIG Eikmo's path has not been easy. Not because it was so complicated, but because it was so simple. Hanig seemed to be a man of direct action; a man who would solve problems characteristically with his hands, not with his mind. Therefore, it became at times infuriatingly difficult to reason out what he would have done next, because what he did next was often spur-of-the-moment.

Too, he was, by far, the weakest speaker of American; barely advanced beyond the mandatory classes at the trade school he went to instead of the Academy, and barely having learned any more from the radio and television during the trip. He seemed uninterested in most things, even things almost anyone else would have thought vital. Therefore, he did not interact as much with Americans as his fellow crewmen did, and tended to live by himself. This was particularly true during the early years of his exile, but it was always true to a large extent.

But in the end, it did not matter, as it turns out. But I am getting well ahead of myself. Best to tell Hanig's story simply as it unfolded, for him, to the best of my ability to reconstruct it.

After the crew split up, Hanig went on through the night, very steadily, looking little to the left or right, until he came, in due course, to a creek. There he stopped long enough to put a hand in the water. Determining in which direction the water was running, he proceeded along the bank, downstream. And again in due course, he came to an estuary. Technically, it was a river, for the creek emptied into it, but the water was plainly salt when he tasted it; the tide came up this far. And now he had a choice to make.

At this point, he would leave solid ground; the cattails grew on either side from a base of water, the soil that nourished them being submerged.

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But it was not a real choice. To stay with relatively firm footing, he would have to divert, and divert into a land of which he knew very little. If he stayed with the estuary, he was in much more familiar territory, for his youth had been spent in country much like this. A little testing showed that he could follow the water, at least for a time, without having it close over his head, so he proceeded to do that. And though in time the water did become too deep for literal wading, it was calm, so that he was able to half-swim, half gain a foothold and jump forward in the water, and continue to move downstream at a good pace.

A more cautious person might have given thought to marine denizens of various kinds — the more troublesome because largely unknown to Eikmo. But as it happens, with the exception of sharks — which did not normally penetrate this far inland, and if they did, were liable to attack only under the most extraordinary circumstances — Eikmo had in a manner of speaking picked a climactic range in which the water was free of that. Farther south, he would not have been as lucky, but he was not farther south. He made his way through the night, taking as much care as practical to keep reasonably quiet, and that was that.

And in due course, he came upon a sailboat, tied up to the dock/veranda of a shack built out on stilts. It was a bit of a shock: one moment, he was moving onward, with nothing to either side but the dim shadows of cattails; and the next, he had rounded a turn and found this. But he was not truly surprised. In fact, he had been looking for it, and considered that it was only a matter of time until he made his way close enough to the sea to come upon the home of a waterman.

There were no lights; not in the shack, not on the boat, not even running lights. Levering himself out of the water onto the dock, he listened. There was someone sleeping in the shack, but that did not immediately disturb Eikmo. He slipped aboard the boat, a twenty-four-foot yawl, and found it perfect; certainly showing signs of wear and tear, but the sails were apparently whole, being loosely gathered at the base of the mast with a few turns of cordage to keep them so, and the hull was sound. With that learned, he examined the ties to the dock, and found that one of them was a padlocked chain, despite the fact that access to shack and boat was limited to water. He examined the chain, and found it strong, and fastened to an eyebolt through the dock, and the other end of the eyebolt apparently with its threads deliberately damaged so that the nut could not be backed off — at least not by Eikmo's hand. Shaking his head, he now entered the shack and stood over the sleeping occupant.

The interior of the shack was dim, and he could not make out much detail, but it was one room, plus the veranda dock from which, undoubtedly, the occupant fished from time to time; and the occupant was alone. He

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was a man of thirty or so, who had gone to sleep with his clothes largely on, and judging by the smell that fountained up from his mouth — he was on his back — he had gone to sleep drunk. Eikmo killed him swiftly, by breaking his neck, and searched his clothes until he found the key to the padlock.

He now had transportation. It did not take long to puzzle out the mysteries of the yawl rig. In a matter of several hours, he was down through the increasingly broad estuaries and on the ocean, and then around Cape May into Delaware Bay. Full daylight saw him headed in the general direction of Dover, Delaware.

The bay was not, even then, the loveliest of spots — the water that sometimes literally foamed back from the hull was liberally laced with chemicals and detergents, and yellowish — nor was it helped by Eikmo's having to tack, again and again, against a quartering breeze. But he forged on, ducking the tankers and freighters that occasionally cut across his path.

In due course, he found a landfall, in the form of a long, deserted, weather-beaten dock poking out into the bay, flanked by an obviously abandoned building, and some distance from a highway he could see. That was the extent of civilization at this point, Dover being inland by a few miles, but for Eikmo the highway was the important thing, with its traffic proceeding more from left to right than from right to left.

He scrambled onto the dock, taking a few things with him and lashing the wheel of the boat. He watched the boat start to sail away, and then he turned shoreward. He made his way over some broken concrete, and then through a scrub field to the shoulder of the highway, which was the main coastal artery, but was two-lane, if concrete. He studied the traffic flow, and then he began to walk in the direction of Dover. In due course the highway became a street. And so he proceeded, gradually seeing signs of life in the form of decaying houses and stores, and then somewhat less decayed structures, and the occasional human, and being passed by cars; and in a little while, he was walking down an undoubted human street in an undoubted human city, with humans here and there, and he betraying no sign that he was any different from them or did not belong there.

He had, aside from his iron rations and his first-aid kit, a compass, a chronometer, and a portable marine-band radio. He had also changed from his uniform into paint-spattered jeans and a T-shirt, which though somewhat skimpy for the weather, and short, were of course far safer than his uniform. The latter was at the bottom of the bay.

He found a pawnshop in due course, probably simply going along until he came to a store window full of all sorts of things with only portability in common. But remember that he had the items in the first place; he

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knew there was someplace where you could get money for items without clear title. True, he traded in the stolen goods for a very little amount of money — he could not bargain, of course, though I doubt he would have even if fluent in American — and with that little bit of money, bought some clothes at a secondhand store: a better-fitting pair of jeans, and much cleaner; the same for a T-shirt, which he topped with a blue chambray shirt; and a pea coat. He kept his issue socks, underwear, and shoes. In fact, he still had the shoes years later, and though they were like no pair on Earth at the time, neither were they outlandish, and he saw no point to discarding them. (It is also possible he wanted something to tie him back to the world of his birth.)

Outfitted, so to speak, he next waited beside one of several saloons and, picking his victim judiciously, relieved a sailor of his pay, which came to several hundred dollars. He killed again, yes.

With that much for a stake, he moved to the Greyhound station, where he bought a ticket to Denver . . . quite possibly because it was the easiest city name to pronounce. Practically every city name has a variety of possible pronounciations, except Denver. And in due course, he arrived in Denver.

In Denver, he lived for many years, working as a day laborer, getting paid at the end of each day, sleeping in flophouses and eating in diners, distinguished from his fellow denizens only in that he did not drink. He really seems to have been content with his lot, and if he hadn't accidentally seen Ravashan on a stopover on his way to Colorado Springs, Hanig might be there yet, and reasonably happy, and out of this story entirely.

But he is not out of it.

— A.B.

JACK MULLICA

THE SAND road gradually widened and became firmer. I was conscious of piled trees, and clear-cut patches in the growth. Apparently someone intended, or had intended, some form of enterprise here. Whether it still proceeded during the day or not, I had no idea. But certainly it was abandoned by night.

I came to a road bridge — concrete, as I later confimed — lichened, partially eroded away, but still sound enough. It was not very long. An enameled sign, very worn, proclaimed MULLICA RIVER, and, in truth, there was some water in the bed below, but if this was a river, it was a poor excuse for one. And in any case, the road kept on going, a track through the quiet and the darkness, until, finally, up ahead I could hear something. I stopped.

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I strained to hear anything that would give me a clue to what lay ahead. But none of it made sense to me. There was something that sounded like muffled laughter, and the sound of glass on glass, but I could make nothing of that. I stood for a while in the darkness, and then I moved forward, toward the sounds, very slowly.

Gradually they grew clearer; they were the sounds of two or three males, drinking and carousing. They were also the sounds of one female, and though at first they had blended in with the male voices, now they were in an increasingly different tone; less companionable, more argumentative. And the male voices grew less festive.

I moved forward again, and now I could see the shadowed form of a parked car, and cigarettes, and increasingly tense voices. "God damn, Margery, what the hell?" suddenly came clear.

"I want to go home," said the woman.

"Margery, we ain't through here."

"Yes, we are. I have to get up early in the morning and work. You've had all the fun you're going to have for one night."

There was a giggle, and a different male voice said: "*I* ain't so sure about that. How 'bout the rest of you fellers?"

Margery's voice was suddenly cold. "The only way you're going to get more is to commit rape. And if you do that, you'd better kill me afterward."

"Rape!" The voice was incredulous; it was the giggler. "Rape!" But the other males were more thoughtful. And just as cold; one of them, the leader, I suppose, said:

"All right, Margery," in a calm voice. "All right." And suddenly the back door of the car flew open, and for a moment there was a light, so that I could see the woman come tumbling out, to fall heavily to the ground, grunting. "All right, Margery. And good night." The door closed, and the light went out. The car started, and the headlights flicked on. "Enjoy the walk home." And the car pulled away, all revelry gone, and in a little while, it was dark again except for the starlight, and I could hear Margery cursing softly as she got to her feet and stood in the road, looking after it.

She didn't know I was there, only a few steps away. She moved, an awkward, twisting motion, and it was obvious to me that she'd been hurt by her fall. And she began to walk up the road, each step slow and unbalanced; she was limping badly.

"Miss?"

"Holy Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Who the hell is that?"

"Jack," I said, taking the name of the All-American boy. "Jack . . . Mullica. I was walking along a minute ago, and I saw —"

"Jesus H. Christ! You were walking along?"

"That's right. And I —"

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"You scared the shit out of me!"

"Well, I'm sorry. Look, can I help you? You sound like you're walking hurt. I've got a first-aid kit, and —"

Her sudden chuckle was both amused and bitter. "It'll take more than first aid to help that. A lot more."

I didn't understand. But that was not as important as reaching some sort of accommodation with her. "Well, look, whatever — will it help you to lean on me as we walk it?"

Her chuckle this time was rueful, and still bitter, but not as much. "Yes, it will help. Especially considering that we have over two miles to go. Bastards. All right — come on." She moved over next to me, on the left. She was almost as tall as I. I noticed that she smelled of perfume, some artificial scent. And we began to walk along the road through the dark, slowly and, for her, painfully. But she settled in against my hip, and I thought to myself, abruptly, about her as a woman, not as an Earth person, and I didn't know what to make of that, but it was better than not thinking of her as a woman.

She asked almost immediately: "Where'd you come from?"

"I got lost," I said at once, having anticipated that I would have to account for myself to someone. "I was hitching a ride, and they let me out in the dark, and I got lost."

"Uh-huh. And what kind of accent is that?"

"East Indian."

"Uh-huh." She seemed disinclined to pursue this line any further. We walked along in silence for a while. Then she said: "I don't suppose you have a place to stay."

"Well, no."

"Yeah. All right — you can stay with my father and me, for a while. Sleep in the barn."

I thought that over. "All right. Thank you; it's kind of you."

"You're helping me get home. Helping a lot. This leg of mine hasn't been good for much since I was a little girl. Polio. So it's a fair exchange." Her voice was flat — there was not a trace of her feeling sorry for herself. But of course, she'd had time to prepare the statement. "My name's Margery Olchuck, by the way. And yours is Jack Mullica." Again her voice was flat.

"That's right." And after that, she concentrated on walking. Even with me to help her, it was no picnic for her.

— Reconstruction, as best as possible, of various bits and snatches Mullica mouthed in his sleep.

* * *

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OPENING STATEMENT BY YANKEE

THE NAVY man shaking me by my shoulder and saying my name over and over was apologetic. And he was very cautious: "We have a man here who turned up in the middle of the night. We don't know who he is. The C.O. thinks we should wake you." And he retreated across the room while I woke.

And awake I did, slowly; that is, externally I was slow. But I was processing the information quite rapidly. Paramount was the fact that instead of handling it routinely, the C.O. was awakening me. So the odds were overwhelming that the man was not mental; the odds were overwhelming that the C.O. at least felt that with a member of Congress on the base, he had to include him in whatever it was, or risk censure for not having done so. That made it serious. So I woke up slowly, but by the time my feet hit the deck, I was ready for anything.

After a quick shower and hasty breakfast, I followed the Navy man to the door of the unknown man's room, where we were met by an armed party. After my nod, we went in.

The man seated there had a definite air about him. He was dark, handsome in a hawkish way, dressed in some sort of fatigue uniform, and as he stood up, I saw that he was tall. He extended his hand. "Hello." His voice was almost accentless, but a little stiff, as though he were first thinking out his phrases in some other language. "My name is Ditlo Ravashan. Captain Ravashan, I think you would say, except that I have no vessel any longer." He said that, and then he smiled.

I studied his hand. Then I took it, and as I took it, I felt for the first time the incredible power of the man. It was as if steel — warm steel —had closed around me. If he had not wanted to give my hand back, I simply could not have taken it. But he gave it back.

I looked at him. And I knew — I don't know how, but I *knew* — what he would claim about his origins. I gave him my name, and my position in the U.S. Congress, while looking directly into his eyes. They were brown, and there was little to see that was different, though they tended more toward the maroon than was common in a white man. And they were as steady as mine. And he grinned suddenly, a sharp broadening of his smile into something else entirely. "You've guessed," he said approvingly. "You've actually guessed! From very small clues indeed! Bravo! But to remove any lingering doubts," he said, "I brought in a body; another of my crew. It won't take much cutting to determine we are different from you inside."

"No, I don't doubt you," I said, making up my mind. If it was true about having a body, there was no longer any doubt. He'd brought it to us to spare the need for cutting him. I could hardly blame him. "All right

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— leave us alone," I said to the Navy party. "All of you" — to the C.O. It wasn't that I didn't trust them. It was a matter of need to know; that's all. And they went, although the C.O. was frowning and hesitating. A better man would have stayed, but the better man had been discharged after the end of the war.

Ravashan and I looked at each other across the room. Then we sat down on opposite sides of the table. "What do you want, Ravashan?"

Ravashan grinned. "Don't you want to know how I got here, where my ship is, and so forth?"

"I'll learn all that in time," I said. "You obviously didn't plan it; you're improvising. That's the primary fact."

Ravashan sat silently for a moment, looking at me. And in that look, I read him for what he was — an uncommonly clever individual, sizing me up, and not realizing that I was cleverer than he. And he *was* clever — far cleverer than any man I knew, in his situation. I respected him for that. More important, I prepared to enjoy our association, and he did not disappoint me for a long time.

He began to speak; of long voyages, at first:

"We range," he said, "over a fair part of the immediate Universe. Well, we should — we've been at it for a long time. Long time. You have got to understand that, nevertheless, we haven't even scratched the surface of the stars in this immediate vicinity. There are very many of them. But in those stars, we have found only one race that was in space before us. Those are the Methane-Breathers. We . . . traffic . . .with them. We are not enemies. But we are not friends, either. If we had an interest in the same worlds, I think we would be deadly enemies. But never mind that for now.

"We explore the stars for many reasons, but the main one is commerce. Natural resources. And the occasional customer."

"Oh?" I said.

He laughed. "We have, as you can imagine, things for sale. Machinery, technology packages, even gadgets. All, of course, more advanced thatn anything your race possesses. In return, we take a certain spectrum of natural resources. Sometimes, too, we find articles of native manufacture for which there is a market . . . much as your more advanced nations will buy certain goods from less advantaged cultures, because they are cheaper for the disadvantaged to make, or because the goods are somehow cute. I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Yes." But I barely noticed the insult. Why should I? I had already established that I was more intelligent than he. What was important was his talk of advanced machinery and consumer goods. True, they would collapse the domestic manufacturing capability if introduced at random. But they did not have to be introduced at random, if one were careful. And

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the man who controlled the flow . . . the man who controlled the flow would become the most powerful man on Earth. The most powerful man on Earth. But all I said was, "Yes."

He said: "There's a catch, unfortunately."

"And what is that?"

"It's illegal. Even my telling you this is illegal. We take an oath. We are not, under any circumstances, to communicate the truth of ourselves to the natives. We are not for a moment to even consider it. It's too soon in your development."

I looked at him. He looked back. I said: "Why, then, are you breaking your oath?"

"Well, wouldn't you? If you were I, and faced years of a wasted life now?" He took a breath. "When I obviously was born to engage life?"

I grinned mirthlessly. In some ways, we were very much alike. He went on: "So I need protection not only from your people, but from mine. Oh, not for a while. But if we are to do each other any good, then in time I may have advanced the Earth to the point where an official commercial envoy lands. And at that point, I had better not be the individual who took so many risks with the secret of our existence." He grinned wryly. "Precisely because I would have gotten away with it. That, they dare not forgive."

I stopped him then, and called the C.O. I could not, of course, exercise any duress over the commanding officer, and I could not keep him from informing his superiors . . . in fact, he had so informed them even before waking me. What he had informed them of was that he had an unaccounted-for personnel who had told a good enough story to get on the base . . . with a corpse. That had been enought for the Navy to send a specialist, who was on his way and would arrive shortly, and depending on what the specialist recommended, further action would be taken. Presumably, that included giving the C.O. a discharge if he had pulled the wrong chain frivolously. Well, that was right, proper, and did not perturb me — though it obviously perturbed the C.O. I did not think the story that this man might be from off-Earth had gotten beyond the confines of the base as yet, and even on the base, the number of persons who knew even a wildly distorted version was minimal.

Furthermore, I did not know if an un-Earthling had ever previously been encountered, but that did not mean much, and you can trust any branch of the service above a certain level of rank to keep its secrets. But a secret like this had the quality that, except in very special circumstances, it could be bandied about, and still it was too huge to be believed.

What I wanted to make sure of, nevertheless, was that all the enlisted men were not in communication with the news media. Enlisted men have an almost unique ability to make trouble, in a clumsy, sloppy way that

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was almost impossible to deny, because you couldn't be sure what it was about, so muddled did it become. And as for the news media — even in those early days, I regarded them with suspicion on the one hand, and contempt for their manipulability on the other. And, as I rather thought, the C.O. had secured the base, and would only gradually release the men who had seen or heard anything, transferring one to Alaska, and one to Hawaii, one to Norfolk, and so forth. And really, what did they know? What hard facts did they possess? Good. With that assurance, I dismissed the C.O. and returned to my un-Earthly man.

We reasoned on what sort of question the investigating officer would ask when he got there, and how my man would respond. And also, I thought it likely I foresaw what I would do next. So that was that.

Ravashan would be loyal to me, I thought, above all other things on Earth . . . and for that matter, when push came to shove, above all things off-Earth, too, though I did not make that clear to him. I did not at once know exactly how he could best serve me. But serve me he would. Plainly he was too precious to let slip away, and I could always think of something later. And so, in that room, the two of us struck a bargain that endured for many years. It did not, of course, endure forever. But nothing is forever.

— From a private tape.

OLIR SELMON

I WAS TERRIFIED. Every noise of the night seemed monstrous. I saw nothing in the dark; I collided with a hundred things in the first five minutes, and to this day, I can only guess at what they were.

I blundered on. And as I blundered, I went through the first of what I would go to sleep with every night for the rest of my life. I conducted an inquiry: *Why* did the engines suddenly begin to fail? *What* did I do wrong in attempting to restore the balance? *When* had they actually begun to fail? . . . Was it, for instance, as soon as we started them up at home? Had they *never* actually been right, and I, fool, had not noticed? Had we in fact been lucky to reach this planet at all, before the trouble became too catastrophic? Could I, in short, have done *anything* differently? And if I had, would it have made a difference? I could not know. . . . All my life, I would continue to ask these questions.

And I tried to convince myself that in fact it had not happened — that I was sleeping aboard the ship, and would waken at any time now, and shake my head ruefully, and go on about my duties, safe and sound. But I was not safe and sound, and I knew it.

I blundered on. And on. It seemed to me that I would never get out of

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this trackless maze of sharp objects in the dark, of unknown voices crying who knew what, in response to what, with the object of what. And *why* had the engines failed? And Joro. Poor, luckless Joro.

It was dawn, gradually filtering through the trees, that brought a measure of a sort of calm. First of all, I could see the trees at last, and pick my way among them, so that the innumerable bristlings of branchlets and twigstickers lessened to almost nothing. I was bleeding, lightly, from a hundredfold pervasions of my skin, and my coverall was punctured and stained with blood and sap — but all of me was functioning, and with dawn the quality of noises, too, went through a diminishment, so I found that I was clearly less nervous, and that, too, helped calm me. But what was I to do? Where was I to go?

Indeed, my options seemed so few. So very few. Here I was stranded for life, with nothing beyond what I could carry, and who would give me shelter, who would give me aplace of livement, when the situation would produce questions I could not answer? What was I to do? Where was I to go? And, asking myself these questions, I moved on, with neither plan nor direction, with no purpose beyond sheer survival — and what good, really, was that?

I confess it freely — if I had had a weapon, at certain points on that first morning, I would have, indeed, turned it on myself . . . if I could have thought of a way to do so and yet conceal the weapon after my death. It is good that doctrine does not allow us to salvage weapons, for surely a weak being might not, in the last extremity of despair and spiritual debility, take as much care for the last part as he should, and would leave a mysterious and rankling corpse, and beside it a weapon of great puissance and intrigue. It was good that the doctrine did not permit us to salvage weapons, I repeated to myself, and sobbed.

It became clear to me, too, that we had fallen into a very peculiar part of the planet. It was good for nothing. Fenced off on the seaward side by cranberry bogs; fenced off on the west by unguessable territory that eventually became America as most people knew it; ending to the north, but where the trees were short and spindling, the soil was essentially sand — I could understand, I suppose, why it was the only stretch of the Eastern Seaboard for hundreds of miles in either direction that showed almost no lights at night; a blotch of darkness upon the lacy webworks that otherwise adorned the edge of this continent. We were come upon a wasteland . . . as had been calculated, true, when emergency landing areas were designated — but in fact, "emergency landing area" was a sort of joke, wasn't it, intended to somehow give the impression that things were somehow under control even after a crash? But they were not under control, were they? No, they were not under control; nothing was under

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control.

I came to a field in the midst of nowhere. I had been moving through scrub pine, precisely; tedious, unsatisfactory stuff, surely useless for any purpose but to break the hearts of people who tried to find some purpose in it. And suddenly, without warning, I came to a clearing.

Thunderstruck, I barely managed to keep myself back in the trees, and peered out at what this might be. And what this might be was an opening in the pines; not so much a field as an opening, unlinked to anything, really, at one margin of which was a small dwelling place that seemed to be cobbled together of whatever came to hand, rather than planned. And a truck, very old and badly dented, and motionless forever, I suspected, for the tires were flat, and the windshield was opaque with fractures. It sat at the end of two ruts that disappeared among the trees; only that much road had sufficed to bring it here, to die.

I looked at this, not knowing what to do. I was afraid — to commit, finally, to having intercourse with these people; to having to speak their language; to masquerading as one of them. That was very hard to contemplate. Anything — almost anything at all — and I would delay the moment. And then a dog began to bark, and I retreated back into the woods and went around the field and went on; I went on I don't know how long, and came to another place, somewhat like the first, but even smaller, in a bare clearing — no truck, no dog, no road at all leading up to it that I could see — and I circled around it, and drew closer, eventually; a hovel, without any sign of life. Perhaps, I thought, abandoned; a place, I thought, where I might rest and plan my next move; and I pulled aside the rotting blanket that hung over the entrace, and ducked quickly inside.

There was only the one room. In the little bit of light that came in the one window, I saw a camp stove, very old and battered, and a chair, and a rickety old chest of drawers, and a cot, bare except for a stained, uncovered pillow and a blanket only marginally newer than the one that hung in the doorway. There was no one inside — perhaps there had been no one in a long time, I thought, but I suddenly did not care. I think I realized somehow that if I were asleep, it would not be my fault what happened from then on.

I lay myself down on the cot and wrapped the blanket around me, and thought that it had been such a long time since I had slept, and so much had happened; so much had changed forever since the last time I had closed my eyes . . . and I slept.

I do not know how long it was before I heard a voice say: "Wake up. Wake up, now." I opened my eyes, hardly knowing where I was, or who, and peered across the tiny room in a growing, heart-stopping panic, and saw an old man sitting calmly in the straight chair. He held across his lap

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a rifle — a single-shot .22, I later learned, with which he hunted small game — and despite this, he did not look particularly menacing. He was very old, really, to my far younger eyes. He looked at me and said again, "Wake up, now." And then he laughed, and though technically I could not be sure — because laughter after all might be subtly different here — in fact, I was positive from the first moment I saw him, that he was hopelessly crazy; and I was right: the laughter was too free, too delighted by very small things; he was as . . . batty as a bedbug.

Which is not to say that most of the time, he was not as sane as anyone. It was, however, to say that his bridges were down, and had been replaced by extravagant structures that were much more daring, if less well able to carry a load, than normal.

His name was Jack English, and he was of an indeterminate age, but probably sixty-five or so. He had lived in this spot in the pine barrens for a very long time, as far as I could tell, and I believe at one time he had had a wife, but twenty or twenty-five years ago, she had disappeared, and he did not expect to see her again. He laughed again.

He lived, as I said, in the pine barrens, and like most people who lived there, he lived on land that was not his own, but did not seem to belong to anyone else, either, and he lived in a house that, basically, he could walk away from in ten minutes, move a mile in any direction, and duplicate in very short order. He had no power or running water, of course; the result was the only constraint on him: that he live near a creek. But he had not actually moved in over twenty-five years.

He told me this, and more, as the day wore on. I sat on a box, and he sat in a chair.

We conversed. That is, he asked me who I was and what I did; what had brought me to the pine barrens — which was the first I knew of them —and what had brought me to his dwelling place in particular. But when I tried to tell him — that my name was Charlie Mortimer, that I was part of a special Army detachment, that I was lost — he would laugh and call me a liar. Maybe my name was Mortimer, though he doubted it, but that I was part of the U.S. Army, he doubted very much, for I carried no military gear, and he doubted if I could be so lost as to be completely separated from the rest of my group; he doubted if I was lost at all. What did I want with him, specifically? Why had I come to his dwelling place? And when I tried to tell him I had not come to his dwelling place, except by accident, he just laughed and laughed. And finally he said, in his crazy way: "You know what I think, Mr. Mortimer? I think you came down in a flying saucer, and you're trying to fool me. That's what I think. Either that, or you're an escaped prisoner. That's what I think. And you know what, Mr. Mortimer?

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I don't give a shit, really, as long as you don't pull nothing stupid."

So passed my first morning on Earth. And this is hard to explain, but after a while he showed me how to cook a meal out of a dead squirrel and some flour, and we ate it, from a plate and a cardboard thing like a plate, with a knife for him and a fork for me, and it tasted delicious. Of course, I had not eaten in a long time, but it tasted delicious. And we drank some wine from a glass jug he had, and in due course, it was time to go to sleep, the sun going down. And he showed me a corner of the hut where I could bed down, apparently not being at all afraid of me.

And the next day was much the same, and in about a week, he went off and came back with a fresh jug and a loaf of bread and some other necessities, though we continued to depend on squirrel and other small creatures for our main dishes, he being very good with the rifle; and the weeks became months, and somehow we managed. Sometimes we went days without speaking, once the initial freshet of lies and half-truths was exhausted. I cooked, and did not ask for anything, and this seemed satisfactory to him. That and the occasional night I spent on the bed with him.

And in due course — in a year or two — he let me go to the general store several miles away, on the edge of the barrens, and trade various things, such as cranberries or various things we found in the woods —axes and saws and such, if we were careful — for the staples we needed. By then I was wearing a pair of bib overalls, of course. At least, I recall I was . . . there was a certain mistiness to the entire experience . . . and in a few more years, one morning he died. But by then I was acclimated pretty well to life as an Earthman, and in a few weeks, I left, with the contents of a buried jar of cash — $112 it was, which he had finally shown me the day before he died.

I worked as a dishwasher in a diner for a while, coming out of the barrens, and then I was a day laborer for a while, and then I wrote away for my birth certificate, living in a town called May's Landing. What you do is, you scan the back files of a newspaper until you find an infant that died about the time you want to be born, and you write away for a copy of the birth certificate, and from then on, it's you. On the outside.

I think that was the bravest single thing I did. Suppose somebody else had already written for that particular certificate? I got a post office box and everything, and let it lay in a box for a week, and snatched it at last, and left town immediately. Even so, I went clear across the country by train to Oakland. There I got a job drafting, and living in a room, and thought I would spend the rest of my life in Oakland, which I liked as much as I liked anything. But Eikmo ran into me, or I ran into Eikmo, and I moved to Chicago . . . or, to be precise, Shoreview. And there I ran in to Dwuord Arvan, and I knew it was no good, and then eventually I read the

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paper, and I couldn't help but confront Dwuord, and that was the last straw; it really was.

You must understand that I turned my head and saw that my hand was going to make contact with the third rail, and I could have stopped myself — I thought about the postmortem, but I suddenly realized I would not care.

You understand? It had come down to that. To hell with the whole game. And I reached out my hand deliberately, and died in violent fire.

— Never revealed. A.B.

JACK MULLICA

WE CAME, eventually, to her father's farm — Nick's farm —on the edge of the barrens. It was not much of a farm; the buildings were old, and even the house was swaybacked with age. Nor was it large. But on the other hand, the soil was a little better; there was grass; there were some towering trees that were clearly different from the barren pines. There were outbuildings, including a barn.

The whole layout was not large, but then, Nick Olchuck had long ago given up on the idea of actually making a living from it. There were a few animals — a pair of goats, a hutch full of rabbits, a dog, enough chickens running around to provide eggs for Nick and Margery, and of course cats, which were essentially wild. I knew little of this in detail, as I stood at the edge of the road, supporting a sweaty Margery in the first light of dawn, but one did not need detail to grasp the essentials. The dog, Prince, had come out of the barrel lying on its side beside the barn, where he was chained, and was barking furiously at me.

"Home. Sweet home," Margery said. She called to the dog: "Shut up, Prince. I said shut up!" And the animal subsided, stood beside his barrel, and regarded me stiffly. Margery turned to me. "All right. You can sleep in the barn. I'll get you some food before I go to work. Now I've got to go inside and explain you to my father."

I looked at her. Up to now, she had been body coolth and bulk and smells, and occasional glimpses, but this was the first time she had stood a little apart from me. Perhaps I was much the same to her, because she took a minute to look me up and down, too.

She was about my height, and, except for a tendency to too much makeup, not bad-looking. I stood peering at her face for a moment, trying to figure out what was off about it; when I saw her again later, it was less vivid, and her eyes in particular looked much blander, and then I realized it had been makeup. What I did not realize for years was that I never actually saw her; she always had some makeup on. But that's beside the

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point for the time being.

She had a slim, long-legged figure. But it was canted off to one side, and one of her legs was much thinner than the other. She was wearing a dress made out of a chicken-feed sack — feed was sold in print sacks, with no company markings, for that express purpose — and she looked out-of-focus. I found out later that she was only nineteen when I first met her, and one of the purposes of the extreme makeup was to make her look older, but now it was smeared and awry.

"All through?" she said.

"What?"

"Are you all through looking at me?"

I tried a smile. "Yes. You're not bad to look at, you know."

"Bullshit," she said, and turned to go into the house. It was painful to watch her make her way, especially since she knew I was watching her. I went to the barn and lifted the wooden latch and went inside.

The barn had not been used for anything in particular for a long time. It smelled of something vaguely unpleasant — I learned later it was mildrew — but not overwhelmingly so. There were some spots where other odors did overwhelm — cat turds and rat turds — but these were localized, and I avoided them with almost perfect success. There were some feed sacks along the wall, and there were several cats that looked up from sleeping in various nooks as I came in, but that was all. The barn was essentially an empty space enclosed by four walls and a roof. I went over to the feed sacks, and they made a respectable bed. That was my main concern. I was tired enough, God knows. And without further ado, I lay down. I thought to myself that life on Earth was a little stranger than it ought by rights to be, and then I was asleep.

I woke up a long time later — late afternoon it was, by the light that came in through the cracks — and beside me, on the floor of the barn, was an upside-down box that had not been there. I lifted it, and there was a sandwich and a glass of something; red and sweet. Kool-Aid, it turned out. I put the box back down over it and went to the back door, which was jammed shut and hadn't been opened in years. But by tugging on it, I got it to open an inch or two and managed to urinate outside. And it struck me funny for a minute; here was water that had never been on Earth before. But I was not the first, and I went back to the food, which the cats were trying to figure a way into, and I smiled, and chased them back, and ate every scrap, including draining the Kool-Aid, which I have not done very often after the first few occasions, for it almost always gives me indigestion. But I was pretty hungry at the time.

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I took stock. There was not much to take. I was in Margery Olchuck's barn after abandoning my crashed flying saucer and the rest of my crew. I had on my issue fatigue uniform, which tended to resemble a coverall jumpsuit; my fatigue shoes which looked only vaguely Earthlike — until Adidas came along, which was much later — but would pass; and my first-aid kit and my iron rations, which were in two of the patch pockets on my uniform pants.

The iron rations you could keep; we had all eaten one meal of them, in accordance with shipboard drill, and no doubt they would keep body and soul together in a dire emergency. Nobody ever complained. They couldn't; not the ones who actually had to live on the things. The first-aid kit had all sorts of goodies in it, but I did not need any of them. And that was it; oh, I had an identity, Jack Mullica, which was both woefully thin and too well established to abandon. I promised myself that if I were ever to be in a crashing flying saucer again, I would do much better next time.

And that really was it. I considered going into the house to talk to Nick, and felt a mild curiosity that he had not come out to investigate me, but he was too much of a cipher for me to pursue that seriously. I didn't even know his name. So I sat down on the feed sacks, and watched the cats lick the plate and the glass, and scratched one of them behind the ears when it cautiously came over, before it jumped away. And that was it. I wondered what Margery might have in store for me. If not then, then I wondered very often later. I see no reason not to assume that I began that habit in that barn, without knowing it, or at least without knowing what it would cost me, over the years.

It hasn't been that bad.

She came in the evening, carrying more food — a hamburger, and another glass of Kool-Aid. She was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, over a bra. I liked her breasts. She looked tired. She did not look sweet, or girlish. She looked all business. She handed me the food and sat down on the feedbags beside me. "He didn't come in here?" she asked, and I nodded my head, and then remembered and said, "No." She looked at me patiently. "Which is it?" And I said, "No," again, and she nodded. "I didn't think so." She shook her head. "He drinks. I drink, too, but he *drinks*."

"What else does he do?"

"Well, that's about it, really. We're lucky to keep the farm. But he had the mortgage paid off before he started drinking, and my job with the glass company looks pretty solid."

"Glass company?"

"Kimble Glass. In Vineland. I ride the bus. I work in the office; payroll clerk."

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Vineland, I presumed, was a town. "What does Kimble Glass do?"

"Medical glassware. We're a division of Owens-Corning." I didn't know what that was, but it didn't matter. "When are you planning to move on?"

Move on. I was reluctant to move on. "I don't know. Do you want me to go soon?"

"Eat your supper before it gets cold." Then she looked me right in the eyes and said: "We can't afford to keep you for any length of time."

Well, that had been pretty obvious. I bit into the hamburger. "Is there some kind of work I could do?"

"Where did you say you were going when you bumped into me?"

"I don't believe I said. Nowhere, really."

She nodded. There was infinite knowledge in her eyes. Not judgment; just knowledge. It was hard to face. "You don't have anyplace to go on this continent, do you, Jack Mullica?" And before I could formulate a reply to that, she said: "It's O.K. Some of us who were born here don't have anyplace to go, either." She grinned crookedly. "I don't know. I've got a few people around here who owe me things. Maybe we can find you a job. We'll see."

I had finished my meal. "Look." I had thought this over very carefully. "Look," I said again, "I want you to do me a favor."

"A favor."

"That's right."

"What kind of a favor?"

"I want you to let me try something with your leg."

She stared at me incredulously. Then she burst out laughing. "With my *leg*!" It was not frank and open laughter. After the first instant of genuine shock, it was harsh and mechanical, echoing back from the walls of the barn in sarcasm and anger. She twisted around to face me with her whole body, and the leg was thrust out toward me. "My leg. I've done a lot of favors in my life," she said. "But not with my leg." Then she grinned crookedly. "Or did you mean my good leg?"

I went on doggedly. It was only way I knew to eventually get through to her, at the time, and the time was what I had to work with. So I persisted. "I want to use my first-aid kit on your leg."

"Your what?"

"My first-aid kit." I took it out of its pocket. "I don't know if it'll do any good. But it won't do any harm. I want to try it."

"Oh yeah. I forgot. Your first-aid kit," she said. "First-aid kit!" She began to laugh again. She reached out and took it. "First-aid kit." She shook her head, then looked more closely. She looked back at me. "I can't read any of the words except Johnson & Johnson."

I shrugged.

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She bit her lip momentarily, then looked at me again. "Do you really think it will do any good?" And I heard the faint note of hope underneath everything else she put into the question, which was loaded with carelessness, 99 percent.

"I don't know," I repeated. "It's worth a try."

"Well, what do I have to do?"

I looked down at the floor. "Take your pants off."

She began to laugh again, and I turned on her. "Look, take your pants off or don't; I think I can do you some good, but I may be wrong; if I wanted to copulate with you, I'd at least wait until tomorrow, considering that you haven't even gotten any sleep after your last time; is that clear?"

She had started some reaction, but my choice of words choked it off before it got started. "Copulate with me?" She giggled and put her hand over her mouth, but it did no good; the giggle grew and turned into a guffaw. She looked at me as if I'd just gotten off the boat, and she couldn't stop laughing. Still laughing, she stood up and opened the belt of her jeans, opened the buttons of the fly front, and pushed the jeans down. She was wearing white cotton panties. She stepped out of the jeans and kicked them aside, and said: "Now what?" Still laughing a little, seemingly unaware for a moment how thin and wasted the leg looked in contrast to the good one. And then I saw that in fact she knew exactly how it looked, and she stood there like a young, if tired, queen, and she was utterly in command of the situation. The two of us faced one another in the barn, and the relationship cemented itself right there; nor has it changed to this day, whenever this day is. I pointed to the bags. "Sit down," I said, and she sat — but not as a favor to me, as a favor to herself — and waited.

I opened the kit and took out the tin of muscle stuff. It was intended to help bruises heal faster. It did not work miracles, but it did cut down healing time dramatically. Maybe it would do something for her. "Stretch the leg out," I said, and took two fingertips' worth of the ointment. "Now. Just relax." I wiped the fingers over the outside of the upper thigh and worked them around. The muscle felt strange, not like a usual muscle at all. But in half a minute, the fingertips of my opposite hand, on the inside of her thigh, were slick with the ointment that had come through her leg. I wiped them on the peculiar-feeling muscle there, and worked them, and in a very short while, the fingertips of my first hand were slick again. It was working back and forth, a little less emerging out the other side each time, until it was finally gone.

She was looking at me peculiarly. "It's as if I could feel it going all through me," she said. I nodded. "And I taste garlic."

"You taste what?"

"Garlic," she said, a little impatiently.

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"Interesting." So now I knew what garlic tasted like. "All right; now we do the rest of the leg." We did the rest of the leg. About a fifth of the ointment had been used. I looked up. "That's all."

She did not move the leg. Her voice was carefully neutral. "Just exactly what do you mean, 'That's all'?"

"That's all I can do for now. You should feel something — a flush of heat, probably; less impediment to motion; perhaps a little growth in the flesh — within hours. It won't be much at first. It may never be much. In either case, we'll do some more in twenty-four hours. And maybe something permanent will happen. That's all."

She got off the feed bags, feeling the ground with the toes of her bad leg, twisting it a little, looking down at it. Then she got back into the jeans. "It feels warm," she said.

"That might just be the massage."

"I — don't think so."

"Let it go," I said. "Let it go. It'll start healing or it won't, and what you think of it doesn't matter. What I think of it, too. Just let it go." I stood there, putting the cap back on the ointment, realizing that I had started something from which there was no drawing back. I looked at her, just drawing her belt together, getting ready to button up the fly on her jeans. "All right?"

She had her head down; the wings of her hair fell around her face, and I couldn't see her expression. "All right." Then she said: "Come on in the house; you could use a wash."

"All right," I said.

I met her father. He was sitting in the kitchen, a half-empty glass in front of him, and a bottle beside that. He looked blankly at me as I came into the house. He was in his fifties, I imagined; a square-headed man gone bald on top, with bad teeth and washed-out blue eyes, in an undershirt and work pants. Without changing his expression or raising his voice, he said to his daughter: "I thought I told you to keep your men out of this house. I said to you, very clearly —"

"He's not one of my men," Margery said.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I'm not a liar."

He frowned thoughtfully. Then nodded. "No. You're not." "You're not," he repeated. He looked at me. "That's all right, then. What's his name?"

"My name's Jack Mullica," I said. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Olchuck." I stuck out my hand.

He ignored it. "Are you. Pleased to meet Margery's drunk of a father. I wouldn't be." He drank from the glass. "Go on about whatever business you have here. Don't bother being friendly. I don't really take to it." He

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took another sip. "On the other hand, I'm not nasty. Count your blessings." He looked thoughtful. "Yes. All in all, I'd say count your blessings."

"Come on, Jack," Margery said, and tugged at my arm. And I went. What, pray tell, else would I do?

The bathroom was crowded — a sink, the john, and a bathtub with a shower attachment competed for space that left very little bare floor —but it was no worse than the analogous facility on the ship. In fact, it was a little more spacious. In any case, I didn't complain. Earlier that evening, I'd been forced out of the barn long enough to crouch down behind some bushes, and then wipe myself with leaves; that experience makes you appreciate indoor comforts very quickly.

She looked me up and down. "I think some jeans and a shirt of my father's will fit you. And underwear. That'll have to do. All right, I'll leave you now." And she did, with a little flirt of her head that might have meant anything.

But when I was through in the shower — and oh, it was a *good* shower, once I figured out what it was, and how to work it — there are things you can't learn adequately from television, not even the television of today; and in those days, it was much worse — she opened the door a crack and passed through a small heap of clothing that turned out to be as described, with a pair of white cotton socks thrown in. "Pass me your old clothes," she said. "I'll wash them the next time I do laundry."

I did, after taking my iron rations and first-aid kit out of the pockets, and passed my clothes to her. Which left me with the first-aid kit exposed, because it wouldn't fit in any of the jeans pockets. It didn't really matter, I supposed, but I found myself staring at it, and wondering if it was doing her leg any good, and then realizing that it was the only thing now that was still mine to control from before the crash. It was an old friend suddenly. And it was waning. I stood there with the kit in my hand, looking at the lettering, and the lettering that wasn't lettering, and suddenly I realized I had been down on this planet less than a day, and already I was more Earthman than not. Which was exactly what the people back on my home planet wanted, under these special circumstances. Everything was going well. Everything. I stood there in a bathroom in a marginal farmhouse in borrowed clothes, dependent on a very marginal girl, and to some extent on an over-the-edge father; I had no job, no real place to sleep, no money, and everything was going well.

I spent another day in the barn, coming into the house only for a little bit of time at night. The father ignored me. Margery looked at me warily; she seemed, in what few glimpses I had of it, to be setting her leg a little differently, experimentally. But I couldn't be sure, and she seemed to be

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almost hiding it. After dinner, she went back out to the barn with me. "If you want to work on my leg some more, it's all right," she said casually.

"That's right; it *is* twenty-four hours since the last time, isn't it?" I said.

"Yeah." She opened her pants, dropped them, and sat down on the bags. I got out the first-aid kit, and the container of muscle ointment out of the kit, and went over to her. The leg was measurably better. It was less wasted, felt more like a normal leg, and seemed more responsive to stimuli. I did not comment on any of this. I simply applied the ointment, and she simply stared over my shoulder at the wall, her expression completely neutral. The only way you could tell, really, that there was something going on was the fact that she wept, silently and not very hard, but steadily, so that her cheeks were wet when we were finished and she got up and put her pants back on.

"Your hands are warm," she said. "Your whole body's warm. I noticed that from the first. You sick?"

I shook my head, getting it right. I had noticed that she was cold; not much colder than normal, but still. . . . "No. It just is that way."

She looked at me for a long time. Then she shrugged and left the barn.

The next day, after work, she came out to the barn, looking at me narrow-eyed, swinging her leg. She walked a lot closer to normal. We neither one of us said anything. It was either working or it wasn't. It appeared to be working. What could you say beyond that, really? Finally she said: "Come on," and jerked her head toward something outside the barn. She stood with a hand on the door, and I went over to her.

"What's happening?" I said, and she said, "Get in the car." I looked in the yard, and there was a car there.

— Mullica's recollections, reconstructed.

INTERPOLATION, DWUORD ARVAN:

It took me a while to get used to the animals — the cats, the dogs, the chickens, and whatnot. They fit their ecological niches in understandable ways, but they weren't the same as the animals we had at home. And it isn't the same to see them in TV and have them actually rub up against you. It is, as a matter of fact, horrifying at first. Particularly the cats.

But it doesn't take long to acclimate to them; to realize that a cat is profoundly innocent. A chicken has no brain to speak of. A dog seems to have some concept that he is doing something bad, or good, depending on the action. But a cat does everything the same — kills and purrs, plays with a ball of string or a moribund mouse, the same in either case. We have no such thing on my home world; it is unsettling to think too much about cats, and thank your stars they are not larger. But one grows accustomed to them, particularly if one realizes they live pretty much

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without reference to human beings . . . or us.

What persisted in strangeness was the smells.

That is something for which radio and TV do not prepare you. And it is pervasive; there is nowhere on Earth you can go to escape the smell of Earth.

When we first landed, there was the rich smell of the bog, and then the scent of pines. The one was thick, and clogged the nostrils, and was deceptively familiar, for it was largely the smell of decay. The pines were more difficult; astringent, so that the mucous membranes dried up and tingled, and the throat felt peculiar. But the smell of her, thick with human sweat, cigarette smoke and liquor, was exotic and oddly titillating, whereas the smell of the farm, with its dog, cat and chicken feces, its odor of mold and dust in the barn, was hard to take at first.

But it was the cars that really struck me as exotic. They were so different from what we had; different fuel, odd cooling systems, pervasive lubricants. I loved it. I purely loved it. Cars seemed to me to speak more clearly of Earth than any single thing else, and I was going to be of the Earth. I was. It was the only course of action that made sense. Soon enough, I promised myself, no one would be able to tell me from an Earthman . . . at least on the inside.

COURTNEY MASON DOWRIGHT

IT IS a riverfront home in Maryland. It is not a large home, and the grounds are not extensive. Nevertheless, it is a riverfront home in Maryland.

It is the retirement home of Commander Dowright, who is not yet so frozen by old age that he cannot get up at dawn and, with a gun under his arm and a dog coursing along before him, go for long walks-*cum*-casual shootings. But Commander Dowright does not actually do that very often. Most of the time, he sits out on his back porch and broods, bitterly. When I found him, he was glad to talk. He raised the tape recorder to his lips and said:

My name is Courtney Dowright, and I was, at the time of my assignment to determine exactly what was going on at NAS Atlantic City, a commander in the United States Navy. I am now retired, of course.

There were several peculiarities about the call to Philadelphia Naval District Headquarters. Minor in themselves, they led to the inevitable conclusion that, once again, Fred Andrews was doing nothing to disprove the grading that had made him graduate almost dead last in his year at the Academy. (Frederick Mayhew Andrews was a captain in the U.S. Navy at the time, and commanding officer of NAS Atlantic City, not a plum job.

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He was scheduled to retire later that year, still a captain, and would have been retired earlier if the opening at Atlantic City had not needed a man for a short while, until his successor had completed certain courses. For that matter, it is problematical that he would have been a captain in the first place if so many other, better men hadn't been killed or invalided-out in the war.)

But a 3:00 A.M. telephone call from a commanding officer to a district headquarters — any commanding officer, any district headquarters — leaves the district headquarters with few options. So I in turn was knocked out of bed, and told that something worth my time was going on down at NAS Atlantic City, though no one at Philadelphia was sure what. That was the first thing I was to find out for sure. And in due course after that, I was helicoptered down to NAS Atlantic City, where, in due course after *that*, I learned that a congressman had somehow gotten involved.

Upon learning that he was a Navy veteran, I at first took this for an encouraging sign. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Upon landing, I was taken to Fred Andrews. In his office, alone with him, I learned that the base might have a visitor from another planet. It might almost equally well have a convincing madman, or some third possibility, but whoever or whatever he was, he was wearing badges that could not be read, and he had brought with him a similarly attired corpse who was not the world's prettiest sight.

I sat back and looked at Captain Andrews for a while, making up my mind tentatively. This was after the first big rash of reported flying saucer sightings — we had not yet learned to call them UFOs — in 1947 and '48, including quite a few by Navy personnel. And I was as aware as he that there were persistent rumors the Navy, or somebody, actually had some corpses; possibly even some live crewmen. But nothing solid; only reports of rumors, and I, of course, no more actually knowledgeable than anyone else in the Navy, as far as I knew.

Well, that was what you would expect. If some base somewhere had solid evidence, that base was now buttoned up pretty good. In fact, that base was leading two lives: one, that nothing had ever happened there; and two, that for the few personnel that knew different, life was very complicated indeed.

Because anybody who thought the United States was going to make off-world visitors — we had not yet learned to call them extraterrestrials — public, or even private, didn't have his head screwed on right. And the same for every other government on Earth.

Why? Because if it was a small government, it knew perfectly well the big governments would take an immediate, intense, and personal interest, which could not possibly be good for the small government. And if

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it was a big government, then it knew it was at the top of the technological heap on Earth, and the visitors were bound to be advanced beyond that, so, ipso facto, the big government could do nothing real to protect its citizens, or say it was protecting them, from whatever. And that inevitably leads to anarchy, which is the thing governments like least of all.

So, inasmuch as the visitors, if any, had somehow chosen not to announce themselves to Earth people so far, the best course was to hunker down and pray they would turn out to be an illusion, would at the very least continue to play coy, or we would, in the fullness of time, surpass them technologically. I suppose. Frankly, the last possibility struck me as unlikely in the extreme, since presumably the visitors weren't obligingly standing still developmentally either. On the first two choices, I had at that time an opinion divided exactly fifty-fifty.

But be that as it may, the immediate question was, What was Captain Andrews going to do? So I quickly pointed out that Captain Andrews was only an inch or two away from safe retirement, and Captain Andrews huffed and grunted that of course he knew that, and he was of course turning the entire matter over to me as the representative of the Philadelphia Naval District, and I said no other thought had crossed my mind for even a moment, and that was that. Then I said, Let's go look at the corpse, and then let me interview this man you've got, and that was when I learned about the congressman.

The congressman was young, junior in rank, and many miles from his home district. But he was indefatigable, in the sense that he was rapidly developing a reputation for going anywhere and doing anything that would inch him up the ladder, and heavyweights in the system had cautiously marked him as a comer.

He was at the base on a visit with some servicemen from his home state, having brought one of them a medal for heroism in a fire, said heroism having been performed while the serviceman in question was home on liberty. An innocuous errand having nothing to do with the congressman's being a junior member of the House Armed Services Committee, and I looked at Captain Andrews with almost open incredulity when I heard that. But then I remembered that the congressman was ex-Navy, and I almost relaxed for a moment. After all, too, this was not the first congressman to think up some excuse for enjoying the free perks of a service installation instead of paying for a hotel room.

So I let that one go by. And apparently that *was* the congressman's motive — or else whatever his motive actually was, it was derailed in favor of the one he had been presented with this morning. Because I never heard of any other trouble at the base as a result of the congressman's visit. Not that — ah, hell with it; I never heard of any other trouble, there

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is no reason to think there ever was any other trouble brewing, and what I'm saying is that life's too short for some people to keep up with all the possibilities the congressman presented over the years. But now I'm getting beyond myself, and certainly beyond the point you're interested in, right?

So. We went down to where the corpse was, in among the gray narrow corridors, the captain and I, and found him in the morgue. We dismissed the morgue attendant, and I pulled out the drawer.

I did not learn much. He did not look any different from a man to me, and he was dressed in coveralls that were slightly different from those one normally saw, but not outlandishly so, and they were marked with badges that I could not read and that did not look like they were in any language I had ever seen — and I have seen quite a few, as have most people who have served in the Navy for any length of time. But there were several explanations for that, and most of them did not require that the lettering be part of a coherent system in use on some other world.

The man *had* died hard; the middle of his body was not a pretty sight. There remained enough, however, to assure us he was a man. Frankly, it was difficult to believe in his being off-world after seeing his genitals: blackened and burned, of a good size, rather they cried out pitifully that a man like ourselves lay there, in worse case than we fervently prayed we would ever be. I turned away. "That's enough," I said. "I'll come back for him later." And we left.

We moved up one flight to where the prisoner was. And on the way, we were joined by the congressman.

It was my first meeting with him, and I was immediately struck by his intensity, and by the fact that it was not in particular directed at me. Rather, he seemed to have an invisible opponent in play, and I — and everyone else — was not as important. Other than that, he was pleasant and polite. I got the distinct feeling that he would always be pleasant and polite as long as he did not feel compelled to study you closely. I wondered what I could do to keep him that way.

Fat chance.

Anyway, there we were, in the corridor outside the prisoner's room, with an armed guard at the door, and the congressman seemed to have materialized out of thin air, although actually he had simply stepped out of an adjacent room. How he knew it was us, and not more casual traffic, was easy — he had kept one eye to the crack in the slightly open door. But until you realized that, there was something just a bit disconcerting about it.

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"You're going to speak to him now?" the congressman asked, and when I allowed that, yes, indeed, that was what I was there for, he nodded. "Of course. Well, you'll speak to me afterward. Correct?"

Well, not correct, exactly. There was no reason in the world for me to speak to him — or to the commanding officer, for that matter — afterward. My report was technically for the admiral commanding the naval district. But I could see now that this would lead to a confrontation with the congressman, and one thing the admiral did not want was a confrontation with any congressman. And certainly not this one, on brief acquaintance. The fact was that the Navy was, as usual in peacetime, fighting to keep every friend it had in the House and Senate. So I smiled frankly and openly, and said, "Of course, sir," and he did his best to smile openly and frankly, too. "Very good," he said, and I went in to the Martian or whatever he was with a definite feeling of unease.

He was behind his table and yawning into his hand when I came in, and gesturing in embarrassment with his other arm as his jaws gaped wider and wider and his eyes screwed themselves shut. "Sorry," he said a moment later, collecting himself. "It's been awhile since I slept. And your name is . . .?"

"Court Dowright. And yours is what?"

He grinned. "Well, so far I've been claiming it's Ditlo Ravashan, and I say I am a member of a civilization that takes in more than just your Sun."

"Ah." I pulled out a chair and sat down opposite him. "And is this true?"

"Which? That I claim it, or that my claim is true, or both?"

I looked at him. If we were going to play that sort of verbal game, we could be here a long time. On the other hand, the longer we played it, the more likely it was that the man was, simply, a man. Frankly, looking at him, I found it quite difficult to believe he had come out of a flying saucer. "Both," I said.

"Well," he said with a faint twinkle in his eye, "I have claimed it. And it might be true."

That eye was — those eyes were — a peculiar shade of brown. I wondered if he might not have on a pair of tinted contact lenses, which were just coming into limited use at the time.

"Are you crazy?" I asked.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Well, if I am — and I might be —I'm not really the right person to ask, am I?"

"Where is your ship?"

"If there is one, it's lost in the bogs." He waved as if he knew which way the room faced; in actual fact, he waved at the North Atlantic. "Somewhere out in the bogs. We would have hidden it, and we would have done a good job."

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"We?"
"Oh, the other man and I."
"The other man was moribund."
"But he would have been alive at the time."
"Would have been."
He laughed again. "Yes. Would have been."
"You're really not saying anything, are you?"
"Well, yes and no."

I was not prepared to take any more of that. The man had an accent, and he had somewhat peculiar eyes, but the rest of him as far as I could tell was as normal as normal could be. We could have spent a year in that room together, and if he wanted to keep playing verbal games, and if I kept to playing verbal games, we would be no further along at the end of that year than we were right this minute. I pushed back my chair. "This really isn't very satisfactory. I'll be back," I said, and left. The man was smiling at me as I went.

They had taken away his first-aid kit; the armed guard outside his door had it. I examined it. It had several things in it that were obviously machine-produced, and the lettering was (a) machine-produced, and (b) unreadable except for the Johnson & Johnson. But, that, too, could easily have been produced on Earth. Nothing said the gadgets actually had to do anything. All it told me, really, was that someone had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to create the kit.

But that, too, depended on the scale of size. For a national government, for instance, or even one considerably down the ladder from that, it would have been nothing. Perhaps more important, even for one man with hidden motives, if it had to be consistent with his story, it could certainly be done. In other words, the first-aid kit, for me in my situation, answered no questions definitively; rather, it perhaps raised a few additional ones. Or perhaps not.

I gave it back to the guard, a little annoyed that I had ever looked at it at all.

"What do you think?" the congressman said to me.

We were sitting in the adjacent room, just the two of us, not much different from the room with the man in it — except that I was facing the door, I suddenly realized, and the congressman was between me and it —and the congressman was pretending it was just a casual question. Well, I'd tell him the truth. Anything else was too dangerous. "I don't know," I said. "I know less, I suppose, than I did before I got here."

"You suppose. Yes. It all has a tendency to raise more questions than it

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answers, doesn't it?" The congressman suddenly turned a smile on me, and I felt peculiar. Later I finally decided it was because it was a perfectly friendly smile, and it chilled me to the bone.

"You know what I think? I think you will give him to me." The congressman was quite serious.

"What?"

"Look at it from all sides," the congressman said reasonably. "This isn't really a Navy matter. It would be different if the Navy knew more, perhaps. But all that happened was that the man turned up at your main gate in the middle of the night. He said only the minimum to the enlisted personnel, he said only enough more to the officers to work his way swiftly up the chain of command, and he still isn't saying much, is he?"

"Not now, no."

The congressman waved his arm — in much the same way that the man had. "That's as may be. The fact is, he isn't talking."

"Sir, I —"

"The chances are excellent he's a man with a hidden agenda. Period. The chances that he's actually the captain of a flying saucer are —"

"That's not the point! He's —"

The congressman steepled his fingertips and looked at me. "That is the point, Commander. That's very much the point. The man might be any number of things, of which the least likely is that he's the captain of a flying saucer. Furthermore, he's begun backing away from that claim. I think you should go back to Philadelphia, report to your admiral that the man was unbalanced — which he almost certainly is, wouldn't you say? —and let it go at that. I'm sure the Navy has a great many other things on its mind. For instance, the next appropriations bill."

"Sir, I don't think that's quite the truth."

"Oh?" The congressman looked down at his hands. "Do you know what the truth is? Suppose I told you that in fact Congress has a subcommittee devoted to investigating flying saucer claims, and that the duty of every member of Congress is to bring in any scrap of evidence he happens to come across?"

"Is that true, sir?"

The congressman spread his arms. "You see?"

I shook my head. I felt I was getting deeper and deeper into a morass. "I don't know —"

The congressman looked at me as if I were not too bright a child, but he was choosing not to point that out to me. "Commander," he said, "there are only two basic explanations for the man. One, he is what he at one time was saying he was. In which case, do you suppose the Navy is superior to the national legislature in dealing with it? Or, the man is a

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hoax, in which case the Navy wants to be rid of him as soon as possible. Now, isn't that a fair summary of the situation?"

"Congressman, I —"

Now the congressman looked closely at me, and I knew I had crossed a line I devoutly wished to get back to the safe side of as soon as possible. "Commander," he said softly, "do you perhaps have a hidden allegiance that makes you so stubborn?"

This was the late 1940s, remember. "A hidden allegiance" meant the Soviet Union, and there was no surer way to spend the rest of one's life essentially as a hunted animal than to become identified with that. You think it's bad now; that was the day of Joe McCarthy. I straightened up as though jolted with an electric current, and said, "No, sir!" as brightly and innocently as I could manage. And on that question, I made it my business to manage every volt that I could, plus some extra I usually didn't know I had.

"Then what's the problem, Commander?" The congressman was looking at me hard.

"Sir, I have a responsibility to my mission —"

"And how would you be failing to meet it?"

"Sir, I came down here —"

The congressman shook his head in mild exasperation. "And you will go back up, and make your report. The base commander certainly won't contradict it. A couple of enlisted men will be transferred, but in fact they don't know — nobody knows — what actually transpired here. The junior officers he talked to don't know for sure. The base commander doesn't actually know for sure. And *you* don't know, do you? Do you, Commander?"

He was right. I didn't know. I suspected. And what I suspected was that the man was playing some game far beyond me; that he hadn't come down in a flying saucer, which was ridiculous, but that he was playing some elaborate game. Which, in fact, was more properly in the hands of the national legislature than it was in the Navy's.

"And what do I do with the corpse?" I asked.

"Why, you give it to the man. He'll know what needs to be done with it. Give it to the man, packed in dry ice. Give us the use of an ambulance for a few hours, and it'll then be as if it had never been. The water will have closed seamlessly."

And that is how it was. The driver returned with the ambulance from National Airport in Washington, the man and the congressman and the corpse having gotten out there and from there could have gone anywhere, and it was not until I was in the helicopter going back to Philadelphia that it gradually dawned on me my Navy career was irretrievably blighted. Because the admiral commanding the Philadephia District could not

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know for certain that I was telling him the whole truth, but on the other hand, he did not dare put me on trial to determine that fact. So he made sure I never advanced beyond commander, because a man who might know as much as I did could not be trusted with higher command. Oh, I might in fact be under the protection of persons in the Navy higher than he, but if they moved to intervene on my behalf, they would show their hand. So they would not move to intervene on my behalf.

And so forth. You see what I'm saying? It was impossible for *anyone* to deal with Ravashan — or whatever his name was — and remain untainted. And it was impossible to get at the truth of the man. And that was that. The base commander died a long time ago, of old age, and the junior officers have many other things to think about, and the enlisted men are scattered, and none of us are getting any younger.

For that matter, you don't know that what I've told you is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, do you? It is, but you don't *know* that, do you?

And Commander Dowright smiles bitterly.

— Statement taken in 1973. A.B.

FOOTNOTE

Commander Dowright was quite correct. Whereas up to then his Fitness Reports had been outstanding, they show a peculiar shift after his visit to NAS Atlantic City. It is not something one can put his finger on legally; the words of praise are still there. But when you put them all together, they give a sense that they add up to "a loyal and thoughtful officer, considering what he is." It is not necessary, of course, for the Reports to ever say exactly what he is.

— A.B.

CARS

IT WAS a '39 Chevrolet, I found out later: four door, with the six-cylinder in-line nailhead engine; stick shift, of course — a car there, with a man behind the wheel, watching me as I walked up.

"It's all right," Margery said to me. "He's a friend." That seemed hardly likely, since he didn't even know me. What she meant was, she was willing to vouch for him. The other thing was that she had uttered an undoubted cliché; I had heard it issue from the mouths of actor after actor, and if I had heard it so often, how many additional times must it have been uttered? But then I realized something else. Margery was no dummy, but she was a rustic, and I was going to get just so much of a range of

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utterances out of her. Well, so be it. There are worse things to be than a rustic.

"All right," I nodded; that was twice I'd gotten it right. As for whether she was trustworthy enough to vouch for anyone, that was an order of question that was beyond me to judge. "O.K.," I said. "And . . .?"

"He wants to talk to you about a job."

"Really?" He was in his middle twenties, I found out, a spare, blue-jawed man with black hair that hung over his forehead in oily spikes. He was wearing farm clothes — a blue chambray shirt with bib overalls — and a cigarette dangled out of a small, thin-lipped mouth. I went around to the driver's window. "Hello," I said, watching him carefully. "I'm Jack —"

"Mullica," he said. His mouth twisted into a mirthless grin. "My name's Roland Lapointe. Get in." He gestured toward the passenger seat in front, and waited for me, his eyes appraising me while I made up my mind. I finally walked around to the other side of the car and got in. Margery got into the backseat, and Lapointe drove out of the farm. The engine ticked over flawlessly; Lapointe, or somebody, had taken very good care of it during the war.

"That's the ticket," Lapointe was saying. "I like my people to do what they're told."

I glanced at him. "Your people."

"When you work for me, you're my people."

"And what makes you think I'll work for you?"

"Haven't got much choice. Can't expect Margery to keep feeding you for free. Can't expect to live in the barn forever — it's all right now, but winter does come."

"I could get another job."

"Not if I say no. Nobody'll give you a job if I say not to. Now suppose you sit and think about that until we get to where we're going." His voice was flat; he might have been giving the time of day.

I glanced at him again. As far as I could tell, he also hadn't changed expression once while speaking. I got the definite impression Lapointe was a genuinely tough man. Maybe not the brightest. But his outstanding quality would always be his toughness; it would carry him far. Doubtless, it had carried him far already. The important thing was, he was tougher than I.

Well, come to that, Margery was tougher than I. The jury was out on Margery's father, but the likelihood was that he was at least as tough as I. So as far as I knew, every single inhabitant of Earth was tougher than I. It made a fellow proud to be a soldier.

We drove along. Lapointe turned several corners, and we left unpaved surface and pulled onto a main road, though it was still only two lanes of asphalt. We passed several farms. Then we came to a corner. We pulled up

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outside a structure I recognized as a garage.

There were two things out front that were gas pumps, obviously, and then there were actually a couple of buildings — a small one in front, and a much bigger one about twenty-five yards back from both roads, set behind the small building and separated from it by a driveway. The small building had a window with oil jars in it, and in front of the building were several oil drums.

I studied the scene with some intensity. We don't depend anywhere near as much on individual transport as Earth people do, though there was a time when we did. Now our cars and trucks run on a modification of a spaceship engine. The roaring, stinking, polluting Earth car was utterly foreign to me. And utterly intriguing. The idea of getting into your own vehicle, and roaring off at speeds of about 100 m.p.h., and going on for miles — far more miles than apparently made sense in a culture with plentiful trains, planes, and buses — and having a garage on practically every street corner in most parts of the nation . . . well, it was grotesque. And it was quaint. And it was, in its own way, glorious.

We forget now; so much is different. But that was the time when America was the undoubted leader in the world, and gasoline was twenty-five cents a gallon, and cars — new cars — cost a thousand dollars, and the U.S. was about to buy a highway system that would cover the country from one end to the other, *replacing* a highway system that was the envy of all other nations. I understood, even then, that without question the best way to understand these people was to understand their infatuation with cars. And apparently I was going to get my chance.

"All right," Lapointe said. "What I'll want you to do is tend the garage. Pump gas, fill tires, hand out road maps, tell people the john is out of order. You won't be a mechanic, I'll take care of that. You'll sleep inside at night; you'll get three meals a day, and a dollar a day. Sundays we're closed."

"You're offering me that job."

"Yes."

"I don't know how to drive."

Lapointe turned in his seat and looked back at Margery.

"So teach him," she said. "How hard can it be?"

Lapointe looked at me. "Um."

Lapointe had gone into the other building. Margery and I were alone. "Listen," Margery said to me, "he's all right. He's hard. But he's all right." And she had brought my kit; the coveralls, and the kit. She sat on the corner of the battered desk in the garage, with her pants down around her ankles, while I worked on her. There was something a little bit evasive

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about her all of a sudden, and that had to be Lapointe, but she flexed and moved the leg almost normally, and she spoke to me in a tone that was much gentler than the one she used to use.

"You keep your nose clean, and you'll be all right," she was saying. "Don't jump to any hasty conclusions. And I'll be around. You got any questions, you ask me first. Got that?"

I cocked my head. "What's wrong?" I said.

"Nothing's wrong unless you screw up. And you won't screw up all the way; you've got sense, even if it isn't horse sense."

"Look, Margery —"

"I owe you more than you can imagine," she said, sliding off the desk and pulling up her pants. "You can't dream how much what you're doing to my leg means to me. But that's not the only thing in the world. Anyway, I got you the best job you could possibly get. You'll learn to drive; you'll get a Social Security card; pretty soon you'll blend right in with us Americans."

"What do you mean?" I asked with a sinking feeling.

"Jack," she said, looking at the floor, "you wouldn't fool a four-year-old right now. There's only one place you could have come from, and that's a Russian ship. Probably a submarine. All right? Get this through your head — *we* don't care. You obviously aren't here to commit sabotage. Chances are you're glad to get away. I know I would be — it doesn't sound like a decent way for the ordinary guy to live, communism. All right; fine. We'll help you. And if some of the things we ask in return aren't exactly legal, well, what's legal?"

It was my turn to look down at the floor. "I see."

"So you keep your nose clean, and we'll gradually make an American out of you."

"Yes."

"And I really do thank you for my leg. I didn't know you people could do that. I'm grateful."

"Yes, well."

"And if you want to bed me, that's all right, too." Both of us were looking at the floor.

Things were going too fast for me. "I — what about Lapointe?"

"Lapointe is my brother. Half brother. We've got the same mother. Came out of the Barrens, settled with Old Man Lapointe first; when he died, she moved in with my old man. One day Pop woke up, and she was gone. Found out she hitched a ride on the highway. Last anybody here has seen of her."

"My God."

Margery shrugged. "It was a long time ago now. She wasn't the first fun-

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ny thing that came out of the Barrens." She looked at me. "Wasn't the last. Though I will say, it wasn't usual for somebody from the Barrens to name themselves for the Mullica River."

Things at Lapointe's Garage settled into a routine very quickly.

Roland did teach me how to drive, by the simplest method — which was to sit me behind the wheel in the middle of a large, open field; point out the accelerator, brake, and clutch and the functions of each; and then stand back and let me stall out a few times, swing around wildly a few times, damned near run into a tree a few times even if this meant wandering far afield, and fairly soon learn to coordinate everything. I did not, of course, tell him that I knew how to drive our ground cars. He, on the other hand, did not tell me that I was a good driver, which I very soon was.

The name of the town, if it can be called a town, was Phyllis. The name of the next town was Wertenbaker. The name of the town three miles down a side road, fronting a lake, was Serena Manor. At some early point in our relationship, Margery explained this to me. Daniel Wertenbaker had named Phyllis for his daughter, and Serena Manor for his wife. There was no particular reason for the towns in the first place; of the combined population of about three hundred, 250 were engaged in raising chickens, one of the few crops that would grow profitably on the soil. The narrow spaces in the woods that the three towns represented were crammed with two- and three-story chicken coops, housing well over a million chickens, and they smelled like it. At night, you could hear the chickens snoring. During the day, you could hear them eating, and pecking weaker chickens to death.

Margery came to see me every day after work, and I used up all of my muscle balm. By the time I did that, she was walking normally, and it would have taken a very sharp eye to detect the difference betwen her legs; in effect, there was none.

She had to account for it somehow. At first, it had been a sort of miracle, but one that could fail. The leg could go back to what it had been. The whole thing might have been some kind of illusion born of hope. But now it wasn't failing, and if she didn't find some way to account for it, there were too many questions to ask about me. And she saw me every day, and I worked in a garage. What could be mysterious about me?

"It's the Sister Kenny treatment, isn't it?" she said, referring to a long, hard course of hot towels and massage, which worked only sometimes, and only if it was started the minute the paralysis set in. "Some variation on the Sister Kenny treatment."

"Yes," I said. "A variation on it." As if I really knew what I was talking about. And she brightened up.

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"That explains it."

"Absolutely." As long as you didn't question it. And what do you suppose the chances were of her ever questioning it once she had hit upon Sister Kenny in the first place? She flirted the leg back and forth, feeling the power and the weight-carrying capacity of it. If she spoke of it skeptically, ever, might not the charm be broken? She licked her lips and nodded.

"Yes," she said very softly. The offer to bed her was still good, I knew. I wanted to, but somehow I felt that it was too soon, and that Lapointe would hear us, and that — in truth, I wanted to, very much, but the thought of interspecies . . . well, I would get to it, but it would take some getting used to — I was scared. I was scared green. I'd had one or two women, not many, and I was afraid of all the usual things, plus giving myself away. I had no idea what the sexual appendage of an Earth male looked like. Whereas Margery knew very well. It would take special circumstances, and they had not yet occurred. And so we each had a secret thing between us.

I know it puzzled Margery that I did not take her up on the offer. But she was too polite to come out and ask me directly. I also presumed that the creation of a good leg meant, among other things, a change in her sex life . . . more discrimination, certainly; perhaps even complete abstinence until she could fully assimilate the change, and fully assimilate the idea that she could be choosier than in the past.

I gradually learned Lapointe's real business. Once or twice a month, a tow truck dragging a car would pull up to the other building in the middle of the night; and once or twice a month, a car would emerge from the building, a different color and usually with different accessories than when it went in at the end of a hook. The car would be driven away by Christie, Roland's right-hand man, and the following day, late, Christie would come back on the bus.

Christie was about five feet three inches tall, and I presume it weighed on him; he was muscular, young, and handsome, but didn't have a sense of humor at all. He kept to himself and handed Roland his tools.

In due course — it was the spring — Christie did not come back. Well, it was a weak point in Roland's system; there was nothing to compel Christie to come back, if he chose instead to keep the car, or the money from the car, and go and do something else thereafter. There was really little likelihood Roland would spare the time and trouble to find him. And if he found him, the money would likely already be spent.

Roland went around in a black rage. Finally I said to him: "Roland."

"What?"

"Roland, what if I were to deliver the cars?"

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Roland gripped me by the upper arm in a hold that bruised flesh. "What the hell do you know about it?"

The hold was not comfortable. But I pretended not to mind it. "I've got eyes. I know Christie takes the cars somewhere. I know he didn't come back. If the authorities had him, they would have been here by now. The other possibility is he's in cahoots with whoever receives the cars, but that makes no sense, because that man would cut off his source of supply if he offended you. So Christie did this on his own. All right — from now on, I'll be Christie. The difference is, I'll always come back."

"Will you." Roland frowned. "Why?"

"Because Margery's here," I said, and it was the truth. Somehow, without really meaning to, I had built up too many ties to cut.

Roland grinned mirthlessly. "Yes. Little Sis Margery. Little Margery that's no longer crippled. I wonder how much I believe in Sister Kenny. I wonder, if it's that easy, why don't more people use it?" His eyes were very sharp on my face for a minute. Then he shrugged. "All right," he said, and it was a moment before I realized he had O.K.'d the deal. "All right," he said again. "You gonna stick with the Mullica name?"

"It's my name," I declared, because, after all, what else could I do?

"Right," he said.

"What difference does it make?" I asked a little testily.

"Gonna show up on your driver's license, that's why," he said, and walked away to use the phone.

And that is how I got a birth certificate, and then a Social Security card, and a driver's license, in the name of Jack Mullica; on the strength of one phone call from Roland Lapointe to someone who could forge the basic document.

To this day, nobody ever checks back to the original issuing authority for the validity of the birth certificate. If you present the purported certificate in another state, the odds are very low of the particular clerk's even knowing what a genuine certificate should look like. For that matter, states themselves change the appearance of their birth certificates from time to time. I presume the appearance of my certificate is actually genuine for its time frame. I don't actually *know* — no one has ever questioned it, and I have never seen another one.

I took it, when I got it, to the Social Security office in May's Landing, and to the driver's license station in Atlantic City, and in about as much time as it takes to tell, I was a valid citizen of the United States of America. Eventually I got a fake draft card, and that was a bit of a risk, but not as much of a risk as a physical examination would have been. I had to explain to Roland that I was a bit old to just take the exam in the regular

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way. He grumbled, but he saw the sense of it. In the event, no one has ever asked to see it. I marvel at such a country — I don't complain.

— Reconstruction. A.B.

FOOTNOTE

A check of records bears out that Mullica obtained them as outlined above. The documents all either are forgeries or emanate from forgeries. The Birth Certificate is in fact rather crude, containing inks not available at the time of the supposed birth, and being countersigned by the wrong names. But no one subjects the ink and paper to analyses, and who knows what the right names are?

The draft card is rather good. It would have to be, since it was required by law to be carried on the person, and was subject to inspection at any time. But Mullica was never asked for it, apparently. From time to time he would have to record the pertinent data on work applications and the like, but in that case the persons asking for the data did not ask to see the draft card. Nor, given the nature of the times, did anyone ever check the data; they simply filed it together with the rest of his employment data.

Until I began the research for this book, I had no idea how porous the systems of identification really are in this country. No wonder Americans are forever getting into trouble in visits overseas, with their much stricter controls no child of Uncle Sam will tolerate well.

— A.B.

STATEMENT, DITLO RAVASHAN

THE NAVY TRUCK let off Yankee at one end of National. Then it drove to the other end, and the driver helped me with the crate with Joro and the dry ice in it. There were no benches; I sat on the crate and watched the truck go around a turn and disappear from this account. It was a little chilly. The crate fumed CO_2 gas through its narrow bottom slots. Once, a man going by eyed the crate thoughtfully. "Lobsters," I said, and the man nodded and went on his way, without saying, "On dry ice?"

I watched the women. I had plans. Most of the women were dogs, but every once in a while, a good-looking one went by, even in her topcoat. I pictured them at my feet, beside themselves, crying out like the animals they were, and this helped pass the time.

After about an hour, a plain station wagon came cruising down the ramp and stopped in front of me. Henshaw — he introduced himself —was driving it; an ugly, appealing black man, well dressed, in his early thirties, who did not waste my time with small talk. He looked me in the

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face, and when he shook my hand, he looked at my wrist. Something behind his eyes nodded to itself. But he didn't say anything. He took his end of the crate; we wrestled it aboard and were on our way.

We crossed the river and stopped at a motel. "You've got a reservation," Henshaw said. He told me the name. "It's already paid for. All you have to do is get your key. Tomorrow, or the next day at the latest, we'll have an apartment for you. And some clothes. Meanwhile, I strongly suggest you get some sleep. And order your food in from room service." He reached behind him and handed me a brown paper shopping bag. "Razor, toothbrush, and so forth." He looked at my jaw again. What he said was, "Good luck," and he and Joro's corpse drove away. I went into the motel and commenced my life as an American.

I had been right, when I carefully misused the engines on my craft — it would be a very good life for me here. Much better than it would have been on my home world. I had seen the retired captains on my home world; they did not look happy. They looked as though they had lost something, out in the stars. As indeed they had; they had grown old, out among the stars, and had had to come home, finally, and gradually dry up, and blow away.

It was a long run on Earth for me, and I enjoyed it immensely. We got me an apartment in Georgetown, and I enjoyed its amenities. I did not go out of town and leave it very often; I did not need to, and I did not want to; why take chances?

We also acquired a very nice house in Georgetown, quite nearby, and that is where the National Register of Pathological Anomalies settled in after we got government funding. I ran it with a phone at first, and then computers, and I never set foot in the NRPA offices. Why should I? The NRPA occasionally sent a message to its "parent organization," and I would answer it, and that was that — the NRPA was staffed by conscientious civil servants, and they ran the routine daily in an exemplary manner. They even did a lot of good for pathology departments across the nation; well worth the taxpayer's dollar. And meanwhile, I took in the recreational delights of Earth.

Not to put too fine a face on it, I had no qualms about using prostitutes, often black and in pairs, which I did with imagination and gusto. A permanent attachment seemed much too risky to me. It meant I would never have a wife, but that hardly mattered; I was not going to have children in any event, and I counted that, as a matter of fact, among my advantages. For one thing, I did not have to go through the stultifying mechanics of contraception.

Prostitutes are cheaper, and one does not have to entertain them with

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small talk. I met them in hotels all over town, for years, and many a memorable time we had. It really is amazing what you can get the animals to do if you make the rewards big enough for them. And I had plenty of reward to distribute.

I proceeded to make Yankee very rich, you see, a procedure he took to very well. I began by having him manufacture shoes like mine, through a dummy corporation, and though there were imitators very soon, that was to be expected — and Yankee owned some of the imitators, too. Then there was the deceptively simple aerosol valve, which alone would have sufficed to make him a multimillionaire if he hadn't had to split it with the front man. And the new way to make a milk carton, the razor that was a continuous strip of razor-sharp steel in a compact head, and so on.

Several things were to be remarked on about all this. For one thing, I got my split, of course, and not even I could spend it as fast as it came in. For another, Yankee, no matter how wealthy he became, did not lose his primary drive, which was not for power, which he soon had to a nearly incalculable point, and not so much for a public awareness of his actual power, which awareness wavered with his fortunes and was never very accurate. Rather, it was for public awareness that he commanded mysterious and fundamentally, deliberately, unknowable power. *That* was more important to him than any other single thing on Earth, by far. It created a peculiar aura around him. Nobody liked him. Nobody loved him — and this bothered him. But everyone kowtowed to him, and that, it seems, was what he held most precious.

And for a third, it would take an inspection team from any home world about thirty seconds to determine that this was too much to be a coincidence; someone was feeding Earth this information. So there was some risk, but it was on the order of requiring Earth to be the subject of an inspection, and then it required the inspection team to find me. I thought I had made that rather difficult for them. But in any case, you will notice that none of the information was strategic or tactical.

Well, actually, when I gave him the secret of the transistor, it was a close call. But in fact, several laboratories on Earth were about to discover it for themselves, and all we did was jump the gun by, literally, months. And I did not so much give him the secret of the transistor — which I did not fully know — as alert him to the possibility. He was the one who found the work at Bell Labs and elsewhere much advanced. So that was all right. And of course the patents were quickly superseded, and improvements on the original design came thick and fast, and were patented by others. But I'm sure you will agree that with a device as fundamental as the transistor, you can spill ninety-nine parts in a hundred, and still realize quite a nice profit. As we certainly did.

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As I say, it was a generously nice run. For a time, Yankee restlessly wanted more information about my home civilization, and data such as the engineering behind the spaceship engine drive. But the fact is, I couldn't have given him the latter if I had wanted to — what would a pilot have to know about engineering, as distinguished from inconspicuous, unbalanced use of the engines? — and the former, he quickly realized, could have been made up or couldn't have been made up, and how was he to know? So our arrangement was not quite what he had expected, but it did make him filthy rich, and he quickly accommodated to it.

And he found ways to use it, nevertheless. I'm sure he told very selected people about me, and what I represented. What else accounts for his rise in American politics? Other people were easily on the same side as he on the Communist question, and other people were this, that, and the other thing as he was, but only Yankee wove the web of obligations and fear, the "natural" aristocracy of the person who came up through the ranks in a certain way, and only he presented his particular solutions to problems that frequently did not exist, although he said they did, and beat the drum for years until they were well entrenched. It was a lovely performance, and I frequently chuckled over it. Even the times he was defeated, temporarily, would have been a permanent setback for any lesser man, but he just soldiered on, and whispered whatever he whispered to his corporate sponsors, and, lo!, there he was again, as if he had never been gone.

And nobody, as far as I know, ever questioned the source of his wealth. Remarkable. Only in America.

And then, one day, after about twenty years, things changed. I had come back from one of my various trips around the country, to inspect various odd bits that proved never to actually be flying saucer wreckage, and I noticed that I was more tired than usual, and that my arms tended to go to sleep. Then, a while after that, I began to get dizzy spells, and shortly thereafter the dizzy spells became quite noticeable; I could hardly stand up without feeling the effects. Lying down became an exercise in increasingly careful motion. And my legs cramped at night. At first, I could solve that by slipping out of bed and standing up for a minute or two, but then the cramps moved out of my calves into my thighs and feet, and did not yield to simple remedies. I began to seriously lose sleep.

I did not know what to do. I could not, I at first told myself, go to a doctor. I became very worried when it proved more and more difficult to get up from a chair — often it took me two or three tries. I was only glad that no one observed me; I did fire the cleaning woman. I did, in short, as much as I could, and when this proved insufficient, I thought to call in Henshaw.

Henshaw, whom I had not actually seen since that one day long ago, was a peculiar person. He was black, first of all, and that tended to isolate him;

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he was a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, and that tended to isolate him further, from the ordinary run of black men. Then, his interests were very broad, and he acted on them: he had traveled to many parts of the world; he had studied far beyond the basic requirements of the DVM degree; he loved grand opera; he painted with quite a bit of skill and had studied painting —in short, and I have just touched on the high spots, he would have been thoroughly hated by the average person even if he hadn't been black, which he was, and which he rubbed your nose in if he got the idea this made him in your eyes in any way inferior to you, honkie.

Of course, nevertheless, Yankee had chosen him to dissect Chaplain Joro because Henshaw was much less likely to be believed than a white man if he attempted to . . . spill the beans. That was many years ago, when Henshaw had first turned up, with the barest beginnings of a private practice among the poodles and kitties of Georgetown. He was Yankee's family animal doctor, and of course had had his measure taken early by Yankee, as all who came in repeated contact with him did. I was taking a chance in contacting him with my problem, but I really had no choice. He was the only man besides Yankee who knew about me, and he was the only man who was a medical practitioner.

I called a taxi, making my selection at random, and had myself driven out to his house in the middle of the night. I left a note in his mailbox while the taxi waited, and had myself driven to the Willard Hotel, from which I took another taxi home. It was the best I could do. I did not think Yankee detected me. Then it was wait for Henshaw to come to me.

He did. DVMs do not ordinarily make house calls, so he had to presume that after all these years, I had another corpse to dissect. The arrangement was that he would be on call in case we ever found another one. The fact that we never did was beside the point.

We sat in my living room: I behind a desk, Henshaw draped over an upholstered chair, a black bag at his feet. I had not seen him since that day at National, long ago now. He had not much changed. He was a large man who gave a sense of power and vitality, and who, besides his wife and six children, took an occasional flyer on other women, very discreet. Every time he did it, he put himself further into my power; I kept a tap on his phones, of course. And Yankee must have done something analogous to that, from before the very beginning; kept the man on a string, until he needed him, and then one day called him and suggested he get in his station wagon and go out to Washington National Airport.

And the man had gone, because he had no choice. But that was not why he had thereafter stayed a contingency employee of the NRPA all these years; no, not once had he seen me. Wild horses, I think, could not have kept him away. But of course, I kept the phone taps anyway.

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I said: "Doctor, something serious is wrong with me."

He raised an eyebrow. "And that's why you chose such a roundabout method of getting in touch with me? And asked me not to talk about it, on the phone or otherwise?"

"Yes."

He sucked his front teeth. "Interesting."

"Doctor, I want you to examine me and determine what's wrong, if you can."

A peculiar look came over his charmingly ugly features. "You don't want the services of a physician? Ah." Henshaw sat back and looked at me. He folded his hands on the knee presented by his crossed legs. "You know," he said, "it's been a long time coming. Your calling on me in this way. I didn't know if you ever would. I wasn't even sure I was right about you. But if I hadn't gambled, would I have this opportunity now?" He smiled without it getting to his eyes, which remained speculative and searching. "The opportunity to get his hands on a living one of you? How many men could say they had done that? No, I've waited" — and now he did smile, genuinely —"patiently. And now I'll have my reward." He reached down for his black bag. "All right, take off your clothes." And we began. "You know," he remarked, "it'll be quite a novelty, having a patient who can talk."

Finally he was done, and I put my clothes back on. He toyed with the vials of blood he had drawn. "Fascinating." He put the vials away carefully in his bag. He looked up. "We'll have to wait a few days, until the lab results come back, before I can be sure. Even then, how sure can I be?" He closed his bag and sat down in the chair again. "Systemically, you're sort of human, but not very much. I don't think we have to worry about what the lab will make of your blood. They'll think it's some kind of exotic animal — which, of course, is what it is, from the human point of view. And I can't tell now what abnormalities are present, not that it'll help a great deal when the results are in, because neither you nor I will ever know what the normal structure is —unless, of course, in the fullness of time, I get a healthy one of you to examine, but I don't think that'll ever happen."

"I really don't care about any of that."

"I didn't think you did. I'm stalling for time." He pulled at his lower lip. "All right. You've got some sort of severe circulatory problem. I can't tell how severe, because I don't know what your normal blood pressure is . . . and neither do you. Shame you weren't a doctor. On the other hand, you wouldn't be here, would you? The point is, it's obviously severe, or you wouldn't have those symptoms. And those symptoms are incapacitating you. Now — what's causing the symptoms? That's much more interesting. And even less ponderable, for the moment at least."

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He got up from the chair and walked around my apartment, while I watched him with every fiber of my being. He cupped his hands together behind his back, and went from wall to wall, without ever really seeing them. "You're a very sick boy," he said to the empty air. "Very sick. And I don't know how much I'm going to be able to help you." He turned back to me. "Not that anyone else could help you as much as I can. But that may turn out to be cold comfort."

"I may die."

"Yes," he said, "you may die. But you knew that, or you would not have called even me."

— Never revealed. A.B.

STATEMENT II, DITLO RAVASHAN

THE NEXT SEVERAL days were not pleasant for me, waiting. And the dizzy spells and cramps were worse than they had ever been. When Henshaw arrived at my office, I was more than ready for him.

He sat down, taking a sheaf of paper out of a file folder — the lab report. He flipped it open and read it silently — again, I presumed — and then looked me in the face.

"You know what a T cell is?" he asked, and before I could say No, he shook his head. "No, you don't." He put the laboratory report aside. "All right. About five years ago, a doctor happened to mention a peculiar thing to another doctor. He had begun getting a number — small, but a number — of a mysterious viral infection from Haitians, hemophiliacs, homosexuals, and h'infants. He mentioned it because he had thought of this cute way to describe the correlation. What was not so cute was that the disease resisted all attempts to handle it; his patients, every one of them, were either already dead or were dying. And actually, he was a little bit scared.

"So you can imagine how he felt when the other doctor said he was seeing the same thing.

"They were at a medical convention, so they checked as best they could. And a significant number of other doctors said the same thing.

"The other thing was, it wasn't the disease itself that killed people. There didn't seem to be a clear-cut disease, as a matter of fact, although their blood workups all showed the same pattern. But they died of half a dozen different diseases; cancers and lung diseases, mostly; not particularly frequent cancers. What the viral infection could do, it shut down the immune system. After that, it was just a matter of time. The first disease that came along after that, the person died."

"How many died?" I asked.

He shook his head wearily. "All of them. After a time, all of them die. There are no survivors."

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"None at all?"

"None. At all. Nobody knows much about it yet. But nobody survives it. And we can't be sure, but I think it attacks aliens, too. I think you've got it."

I looked at him incredulously. "You think *I've* got it? Why? Surely, you must —"

"Be mistaken? Maybe."

There was something about the way he said it; the way he looked at me. "But you think I've got it."

"I'm afraid so."

"How did I get it?"

"Well, I gather your sexual habits —" He shrugged. "Sex seems to have something to do with it."

"Jesus Christ, if that's all it takes, this town ought to be a hecatomb!"

"No argument. Perhaps in time it will be." He shook his head. "I know you won't take much of an interest, but this does look very bad for the future of the human race." He laughed without humor. "And I can't tell anybody about it. Well, it'll emerge among the more sensitive parts of the human community, I'm sure. It'll be among the heterosexuals; white male Anglo-Saxon Protestant heterosexuals. That'll take care of it . . . raise an outcry like you couldn't believe."

"How long have I got?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. A month, maybe. Maybe a week. Whatever your particular disease is, it seems well advanced."

"A week."

"It's hard to tell."

"A week," I repeated. I looked around the office. "Well." The thing was, how did we do a funeral in which the corpse was totally destroyed? Because if it weren't, some medical examiner whom we did not control would grow very interested.

"Henshaw, you've got to help me."

"Yes, I do," he agreed. He shook his head. "Funny how it leads you to this day. Life. I decided I was different, and I was different, but it didn't help after all."

"What are you talking about?"

"I didn't take any precautions while examining you. Why should I? But the fact is, just by some minor action I don't even remember, I may have contracted it. On the other hand, maybe not. But we can't be sure. I called the lab and made careful inquiries, though, and none of their technicians got any of your blood in a cut. So *that's* probably all right."

"Wait a minute —"

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that," Henshaw said. "For example, you apparently had a long interval between exposure and reaching a critical stage. And

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someone exposed to you might have even longer — after all, you *are* an alien, and any number of things might have happened. No, I might not have been exposed at all. But on the other hand —" He shrugged, not too casually. "On the other hand, we're not even sure what to look for, exactly, in the blood of someone who hasn't reached criticality. So I can't be sure. So I can't stick it in my wife or anybody else, anymore, forever." He laughed, not amusedly. "Ain't that a bitch. Of course, your case is considerably worse than that, so I don't expect you to sympathize."

And I don't suppose I did. His case was even funny, in a way . . . spending the rest of his life wondering when the disease would break out in him, nagged by the thought that he might not have it at all. But not daring to take the chance. Yes, it *was* funny. But I thought it best not to laugh. The wave of dizziness would have been overwhelming.

"Listen," he said, "we don't want to tell (and he gave Yankee's real name)."

No, we didn't. I had been very right to take precautions. But I said: "Well, that's interesting. Why not?"

"I've thought about it," he said. "All I can see coming from it is a million questions, including, among others, what in the hell I was doing visiting you in your apartment. I'm not supposed to know you, beyond one contact a long time ago. And of course, that was true, until recently."

"I see."

"I don't have to tell you what he's like."

No, he didn't. He was right. The questions would never stop. The trust, once thought to be broken, would not be restored. It was even possible an accident would befall Dr. Henshaw. I had no reason to believe that — but in the case of Yankee, the fact that I also had no reason not to believe it was something to be considered. "All right. Makes sense. And it certainly makes no difference to me at this point."

So we left it at that. I sank back in my chair, the world whirled and spun.

And the time came. I could not walk anymore, and my body would convulse in cramps that were indescribably painful. It was more than a week after the last time Henshaw and I spoke. It was less than a month.

Henshaw came for me. I looked around the apartment one last time. Then I emptied my pockets, because when I left this apartment for the last time, I would disappear without a trace. Disappear permanently, but in any case, without a trace.

I hoped Yankee would reason that my people might have come for me. I chuckled a little bit.

The NRPA would go on; in time, it might even develop a new parent organization. I laid my wallet down on top of the little pile on my desk, patted my pockets, and extracted one last item — a Democratic National

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Committee matchbook. I looked at it, smiled briefly, and laid it down. It gave the address — the Watergate complex — and a phone number.

Henshaw looked at it. "What the hell are you doing with one of those?" he asked, a little incredulously.

I laughed. "I didn't get a chance to try it. There's a hot rumor around that a call-girl ring is operating out of one of the spare offices there."

"You're shitting me."

I shrugged. "That's the word. But what's the difference? Neither one of us is ever going to give it a try." I turned to leave the apartment, and stumbled into his arms.

We drove to a Virginia farm, long abandoned, the track running through shrubbery and fallen fences, until we stopped at what remained of the yard. Henshaw shut off the engine and looked at me. Then he said, "No point stretching it out," and opened his black bag. He took out a hypodermic and bottle, and filled the hypodermic. "Cyanide," he said. "It'll kill you very quickly."

"All right," I said.

"Anything you want to say?"

Was there anything I wanted to say? To have come all this way, and to end like this. I remembered the chaplain, and how I had questioned him as he was dying. "What is the meaning of life?" I had asked him, and he had finally answered, "Hurt." Or perhaps not. Really, it occurred to me, it was a question to ask a child, not a dying man. "No," I said. It hadn't been a bad life, everything considered. I was beginning to recall one of its more pleasantly outrageous moments, with a woman beneath my face and another kissing her while I fingered — but that was when I felt the needle go into my arm, and very soon thereafter, I was dead.

Henshaw pushed me out of the car and drove it a little ways away. Then he got out, opened the trunk, and took out the two five-gallon cans of gasoline. He doused me with one of them and set it alight. Then he retreated to the car until the flames died down, and he poured the second can over what remained of me, and lit that, going back to the car again. Finally he came back and stirred the remains, until you could not have said what it was that had burned there. There were some bone fragments, but beyond seeing to it they were scattered, Henshaw did nothing further. He did not need to. And so I departed this life, far from home. But whether I was home or not, I had had a good life. A somewhat shorter one than I had anticipated, but I had had the money, I had had the girls, and nobody had told me what to do. Is there, really, anything else? Are you sure?

— Never revealed. A.B.

CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN FUNCTIONARIES:

#1: I don't get it. I went into the apartment, and there's nothing unusual

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there but a pile of clothes, with the contents of the pockets piled on top.

#2: You've got no clue as to where the occupant's gone?

#1: None whatsoever. Everything's got a light film of dust on it, so he's been gone at least a week.

#2: All right. Inventory the stuff out of his pockets, and come back in. Then I'll pass the word up.

#2: Well, the shit hit the fan when I made my report. He wants you to get together a crew of trustworthy guys, break into the Watergate, and scour Democratic National Committee Headquarters ASAP.

#1: You're kidding.

#2: No, I'm not.

#1: Christ, there's never anything in a national committee headquarters! It's a clerical office, for Christ's sake!

#2: Buddy, you know that and I know that, but apparently he doesn't. So I suggest you do exactly as instructed. Put together a crew — get a bunch of those Cuban exiles or somebody else that'll tend to be loyal. And get in there!

#1: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ.

MORE CARS

SO FOR A WHILE, I was Christie. Once a month, or sometimes twice, I drove into Newark, and parked the car in another garage, and a man handed me a sealed envelope that I took back to Roland, riding the bus.

The trips fascinated me at first. There was so much to see — the farms, and the gradually larger and larger villages, and finally the city, which was actually a whole group of cities, of course; the only way you could tell you were in Newark, finally, was by a sign on one side of a street. This was before they finished the New Jersey Turnpike — in fact, it was before they finished a whole bunch of things. The Adams Burlesque Theatre was still going in downtown Newark; ah, it was all right. They stripped down to nothing sometimes. And the comics were great, really great. I even saw Joe

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Yule, who was Mickey Rooney's father.

But truth to tell, it began to wear thin after a while. I wasn't getting anywhere. I got to Newark once or twice a month, but it was as if I were on an elasticized string; I always went back. And the thought of spending the rest of my life on the edge of the Barrens was more than I could comfortably live with.

My English got good; I was reading a lot. My favorite was the car magazines, of course. I even wrote some letters, and they printed them; it was mostly pointing out errors, at first.

I wasn't getting anywhere with Margery, either. I began necking with her, timidly at first, and later with considerable warmth, and she enjoyed it as much as I did, but that was all. Roland Lapointe just shook his head. "Look, you do know what it's for, don't you?" was as far as he went in commenting. I nodded, my face flaming, and he threw a bolt into a bucket on the other side of the garage and walked out.

One thing I learned from the burlesque was that Earthwomen had essentially the same equipment I was more or less familiar with. And I finally got my hands on one of Roland's nudist magazines, and found out my equipment was not essentially different from what Margery was accustomed to. But somehow . . . I don't know. It just . . . well, it might have gone on forever, I suppose, but one time I came back from Newark at dawn and found the light on in the back garage.

It was dawn. Roland never got up at dawn; he worked mostly at night. So the chances of the light having gone on recently were very low. But it was just as unusual for Roland to work *through* the night. In fact, he had never done it.

I looked at the window for a long time. Then I cautiously opened the door, and first thing that struck me was the smell. It reminded me, in a way, of the spots in Nick Olchuck's barn where the cats and the rats had been. But this was fresher. I went around the stuff piled in the front of the garage to look harmlessly through the window, and there was Roland, dead.

He *was* tough. The car had slipped off a jack and put a brake drum in the center of his chest. If the wheel had been on the drum, he might have lived. Even then, from the blood and the torn-up fingers, it was clear he had been hours dying, his chest all concaved, but trying to push the car off to the end, dying, finally, in the small hours of the night, alone and thinking God knows what. I looked at him for a long time, and a lot went through my mind.

But really, my choices were very few. I couldn't keep the operation going, and I couldn't expect to keep the garage. . . . I couldn't expect anything. And I realized it was my big chance.

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I backed out of the garage and closed the door. Then I went over to Roland's car, and the keys were in it, as they always were. I drove over to Margery's and threw pebbles at her window. When she finally opened the window, tousle-headed and with her breasts falling out of her nightgown, I said: "Let's go."

She blinked. "What?"

"You coming with me?"

She blinked again. Her glance grew sharp. She took in Roland's car, and the sealed envelope sticking out of my pocket, and she bit her lower lip, but she nodded. Twenty minutes later we were on our way, headed for the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and I was explaining. It didn't take much. "All right," she said, "I've got it."

"One more thing."

"What's that?"

I carefully did not look at her. "Will you marry me?"

She said nothing for quite a while. Then she began to laugh. "Sure. Why not? — somebody's got to make an honest man out of you."

"I didn't mean to make a joke," I said.

She bit her lip. "No, I don't suppose you did." She looked at me in the morning sunlight while the car zipped along. "Neither did I, really." Her eyes were grave. "Yes, I'll marry you. For richer or poorer. For better or for worse." Her mouth quirked up. "I'll even throw in till death do us part; how about that, Jack, my Mullica Jack?"

I studied her. "I hope to make you happy."

She shook her head, staring off at nothing. "I think you've already done as much about that as you could," she said. "It's quite a bit, you know. Don't try to do any more than you can."

I didn't say anything. We would see.

We were married in a little chapel in Sandusky, Ohio. "You may kiss the bride," the beaming JP and the beaming witness said, and I did. Then we moved to the Lake Vista Motel, and there the pattern of our life together was established forever. I looked at her bleakly in the morning light, and she looked back at me and shook her head slightly.

"It doesn't matter that much, Jack," she said.

"Maybe it'll be better as I get used to you."

"Maybe. The big point is, I'm warm, I'm comfortable, and I know you love me."

I smiled a little. We were on the bed, stark naked, and she looked so desirable, so much the woman — well, it wasn't as if I hadn't satisfied her, because I had. And it wasn't as if I hadn't ejaculated, because I had. But it was also true that I had no idea how she felt to be inside of, which made me

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practically unique among the men she had known.

"Jack —"

I let my grin widen. "What the hell. It wasn't so bad."

She laughed in turn. "No. No, it wasn't." She wriggled on the bed. "In fact, if you felt like some more, I could use —"

Well, that's as much of that as you need to know. Gradually, over time, we accommodated. The time also came when she stayed out a little late, and after that, for all the years we were together, there were times when she stayed out. But she always came back. It was all right. Really.

We settled down in Detroit. I got a job in a garage — just cleaning up at first, but eventually I got to be the lead mechanic — and she got a series of jobs as a supermarket cashier and so forth. Nobody ever came for us. What happened to Nick Olchuck, we never knew, but the assumption is he vanished into a bottle. Roland's car we left on the street, miles away from the first apartment we got, and nobody ever connected us to it. I went by it a couple of times, and first the tires were gone, and then the hood and trunk were open, and then the engine was gone, and in about a week — this was before Detroit got real bad, which was why it took so long — all that was left was the frame and the body shell. So that was all right. And we lived.

We lived not badly. Both of us were making good money. I was making a bit on the side; *Automotive News* ran some of my fillers, and some of the other magazines. And then one day, in the Classified section of the *News*, was an ad for an entry-level position in the public relations department of the number-three carmaker. I was, I guess, a little bit older than most of the other applicants, but I had a track record established, and the man who would be my boss liked the way I wrote, and so I became an automotive PR man.

It was not glamorous. All the glamor is on the outside. It was cranking out press releases about the new rear-axle ratio, and the rejetted carburetor, and like that, and you had to go to the engineers for the raw data. Engineers do not particularly like PR men. The senior PR men got to stand around and test tracks in suits and ties without a spot on them; we grunts had to find someplace that would wash a car at 6:00 in the morning in some godforsaken hole on the day of a press conference. More than once, I've mopped off a boss's car with the T-shirt torn from my own body, hosing down the piece with a hotel loading dock hose. And turned up at 8:00 A.M. impeccably dressed, except I wasn't wearing an undershirt, handing out press kits to contemptuous automotive journalists, and secretly wondering if the engineers had actually had time to get the units into halfway decent shape. I remember the time we sent off the automotive editor of a major magazine to drive back to Long Island and test the hot new brakes on a completely new

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model; after he was gone, it turned out the engineers hadn't gotten delivery on the hot new brakes, so they substituted a set from the old model. We heard about that — we heard about that a great deal — and oddly enough, it wasn't the engineers' fault somehow; it was the PR department's.

But everything that doesn't outright kill you will eventually go away. One day they offered me the top job in the Chicago shop of the PR department, and I took it, because it was a good deal of money, and Margery and I moved to near the Borrow Street El stop in Shoreview. We lived in a nice condo overlooking the lake, and not even Selmon's eventually turning up really spoiled it, though I will admit I began hitting the bottle a little harder. But even that wasn't bad enough to really matter. I had made it — I was an American named Jack Mullica; I had a good job; a wife, Margery; and I was home free.

Even after Selmon died — God, I felt sorry for the poor dumb son of a bitch! — I was home free.

— Reconstructed. A.B.

THE END

IT WAS AUGUST, and Jack Mullica was home, idly watching TV. He was on sick leave. At a press conference in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, at 9:00 at night, or thereabouts, he had been out at an airfield, checking the lineup of cars for tomorrow morning's exhibition. Somehow one of the cars had been left idling, and somehow it had dropped into gear. (The PR department of course denies that ever happens, so the incident was tightly suppressed.) At any rate, the car had brushed Jack while he was paying attention to something else, and he had a badly bruised shoulder and several other deep bruises. He was wearing a home-style sling on the arm and was doped up on Margery's Darvon now; that was all right — there wasn't anything to that, although he didn't much care for the close approach to getting something broken, and being taken to a doctor. But he was convinced it had been a simple accident, and not liable to be repeated.

Margery was out somewhere. Jack was watching President Richard Nixon getting into a helicopter in the middle of the day, and thrusting his arms out to each side with his fingers spread into a V. His family was around him. Jack frowned; where was Nixon off to now, when he ought to be staying in Washington and putting down this Watergate scandal? He was about to bring more attention to the whole business — he thought the TV had made a reference to President Gerald Ford; what they meant was vice president — when the doorbell rang.

Margery's forgotten her keys or something, Mullica thought as he

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made his way to the front door. Came into the building on someone else's ring, and now she's standing outside, waiting for me to let her in. He opened the door, and there was Hanig Eikmo. Mullica gaped at him, and Eikmo, who was bent a little oddly, and wearing a suit from Kmart or someplace like that, and needed a shave, said in a hasty voice: "Can I come in?"

"Well — well, sure," Mullica said, and stepped back. He could not close his mouth. How in the hell had Eikmo — it *was* Eikmo, wasn't it?; he peered at the man as he came in and pushed at the door behind him, Mullica giving ground — yes, of course it was Eikmo, and somewhere in his system, Mullica realized the Darvon was affecting him more than he had thought.

"Can I sit down?" Eikmo was saying, and once again Mullica said, "Why sure," and Eikmo sat on a straight chair, ignoring the overstuffed sofa.

"How are you, Dwuord?" Eikmo said. "Things going well for you?" And Mullica belatedly realized Eikmo was speaking in their old language.

He pushed the language forward, speaking it for only the second time in years. "I — how did you find me?" Mullica was gathering himself, getting his presence back.

"Well, Selmon was writing to me once a month; payments; sending back the money he owed me. In the course of that, he told me you were here. And then the letters stopped coming." Eikmo looked around. "You alone? Nobody lives or visits here except for your lady?"

Mullica nodded. Eikmo looked around him again and relaxed to a great extent. "Nice. I was settled in pretty well, too, but not like this. Wife died a little while ago. Not too much of a surprise; she was a lot older than I." Eikmo's voice grew softer for a moment. "I liked her a lot. Came from someplace near where we originally crashed. Funny. Coincidence. But she left years before we got there. Well, anyway — I came out here looking for Selmon, and I found out what happened. Finding you wa n't that hard. I've been following you for about a week. When I saw you ady go out a while ago, I came up."

"Look, Eikmo, it's nice to see you, but policy —"

Eikmo laughed. "Policy! You haven't sold them the shoes, and the razor, and a dozen other things?"

"Christ, I use an electric razor. What are you talking about?"

Eikmo laughed. "Sure. You don't know a thing about it."

"Oh come on, Eikmo —"

Eikmo stood up. "It doesn't really matter what you say, does it? I'll take care of you. Living high on the hog. Killing Selmon." He slipped a long, sharp knife out of his sleeve. "What's the matter with you!" he shouted suddenly. "Killing a poor harmless man like Selmon!"

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"I didn't kill Selmon!" Mullica cried out in protest, but at the same time, he turned his body, and so the knife, which should have gone into his belly, sliced instead through his right forearm muscle, glanced off his equivalent to a radius and ulna, continued upward to the elbow, and jammed there, caught in the joint.

"Jesus!" Mullica cried, and fell back, spouting blood, confused, conscious that he could not bend either arm now, seeing the blood painting the corridor walls, stepping back farther.

"Leave me alone!" he blurted, falling into a couch, trying to find the pressure points in his forearm with the fingers of his left arm, which were dreadfully weak.

"You killed Selmon," Eikmo repeated, grappling for the knife.

"No! It was an accident. Why would I kill him?" It was a nightmare; Mullica turned his head this way and that, trying to find something that would help him, insanely watching Nixon's helicopter fly away. He didn't know if he should stop the flow of blood before he stopped Hanig Eikmo somehow; probably. Things came and went in his head with unnatural speed. He tried to hold on to one thought, any thought, and he couldn't; he couldn't.

Eikmo had his hands around Mullica's throat; Mullica was vaguely conscious that Eikmo had his knee in Mullica's lap.

"No! This is ridiculous, Eikmo! Help me stop the blood —"

"No. I'm not gonna help you stop the blood."

Mullica, in a panic, threw Eikmo off. He backed away from Eikmo, across the room. Eikmo came after him; an older Eikmo than Mullica remembered, but Eikmo, Jesus, Eikmo; he was supposed to be in Oakland, and instead — "Why, Eikmo?"

Eikmo had another choke hold. "What the hell did you kill him for?"

"I didn't —"

Now they were crashing through the doors to the balcony. And now he felt the railing pressing into his back. And now he was going over, and Eikmo was leaning on the railing, looking down at him, and getting smaller.

Margery came home. The front door was pushed shut, but the lock hadn't quite found the striker plate. The hall was covered in blood. She dropped the grocery bag and sprang forward. She saw a man leaning over the balcony rail. She cried out, or rather, she sucked in air, and the sound of it was a voracious rattle in her throat. She was on the balcony in a split second, and as a startled Eikmo began to turn, she placed both hands flat on his chest and pushed. No one on Earth could have resisted that push. Eikmo went toppling into space, only moments after Mullica, and crashed

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down through twelve floors of emptiness before impacting on the concrete sidewalk, almost exactly on the spot where Mullica lay. And finally Margery cried out; it floated down, hard on the sodden thump of Eikmo's body. "Jack! Oh Jack Mullica!"

Mullica saw the sidewalk coming up at him at an amazing rate of speed. Then there was a moment's blackness, and then he was looking up, and Eikmo was hurtling down at him. Jack rolled out of the way. His sling and the knife were gone. He looked up, and Margery was standing there, many floors above the street, shouting something, and then he was up there, holding her in his arms, and she was looking at him with all the love in the world, and he was taking her in his arms, and she was crying with joy, saying, "Oh Jack Mullica! Oh Jack Mullica!", so he took her into the bedroom and took her in his arms, and she was tearing off her clothes and his, and he was huge, he was godlike, and they made love, and they made love, and they made love, while she kept murmuring, "Oh Jack Mullica!" over and over again, wild and wanton, in his arms, beautiful in love.

— Never revealed. A.B.

Henshaw shook his head imperceptibly. He had told the widow he was with a government agency, which was true enough. Still, one had to be careful.

It was some days after the double death. The blood in the hall had been partly cleaned up. There was new glass in the balcony doors, though the doors themselves were splintered in places and only temporarily repaired. The widow did not look good, which Henshaw found a fleeting moment to regret, because she was basically a fine-looking woman. But he was still not certifiably clear of the disease. They still didn't know much about it. They were beginning to suspect a long incubation period. It really didn't matter to him; he was going to play with nothing but his hand for the rest of his life, and that was that. And, besides — Well, besides.

The widow sat at one end of the couch, very small somehow, very much in need of something she would not get. She looked at nothing. An open decanter of scotch, mostly used up, sat on the end table. A glass, mostly drunk, was in Margery Mullica's hand. She cried, and she looked at nothing.

A television set was on, ignored, just something to fill the room a little. Henshaw actually looked for a moment, and saw that Gerald Ford had pardoned Richard Nixon. He shook his head incredulously.

"Mrs. Mullica," Henshaw said gently.

She looked at him with faint interest.

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"Mrs. Mullica, I'll be going in a minute." And leaving you completely alone. "It's self-defense. That's clear. You'll be all right. But can you tell me *why* you pushed the stranger over the rail? Can you tell me that?" There were so many other things she could have done. True, most of them wound up with the stranger killing her, too. But still —

She smiled wanly, and looked at the drink in her hand. Then she looked at Henshaw. "I loved him," she said. "I didn't care. He fixed my leg. And he was the most decent man I ever knew. Or ever will know. Even if he was a Russian deserter. I didn't care where he came from." She was sort of smiling, and sipping at her glass, but she had not actually, at any time, stopped crying. "I didn't care where he came from," she said again. "I cared what he was. I will never find a man like him again," she said softly. "Never, never, never." And she continued weeping.

— From Henshaw's unwritten novel.

Well, there you have it. I began to research this book after the media story came about two men falling off a condominium balcony. The TV and the papers covered it, of course, but something about the story didn't quite ring right. I figured it was worth a look. And the first thing I found, of course, was the blood all over the apartment wall — which nobody else had mentioned, and which I saw only because the superintendent happens to be my cousin. With that much to go on, I was off.

I'm sorry the book isn't more definitive. Actually, much of what precedes this closing note had to be made up. Well, all right, call it a docudrama, instead of the documentary that'll never be written because there's just plain so much that *has* to be conjecture. I mean, all five of them are dead, and were dead before I started on the book. Marjorie finally told me what she knew, for the most part, but when you look at it, she didn't really know very much, did she?

In fact, I could have made up the *whole* thing, couldn't I?

— A.B.

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F&SF favorite, **Robert Reed,** makes an appearance in December with an off-world science fiction story called "Guest of Honor." Pico arrives home from her space travels to greet sixty-three people, people who made her their guest of honor, and all they ask in return is that she share her life with them, each and every detail.

"Willie," our cover story by new writer **Madeleine E. Robins,** adds a light touch to the issue. A well known fictional scientist uses body parts and electricity to build a man, and when the current shuts off, he discovers that he has a six-foot, two hundred pound . . . baby.

Our next three cover stories feature Jack Cady, Kate Wilhelm, and Harry Turtledove. In future issues, Ben Bova and Michael F. Flynn will provide science fiction while Esther M. Friesner adds a bit of humor. So consider F&SF when you're giving gift subscriptions this year. Your friends will thank you.

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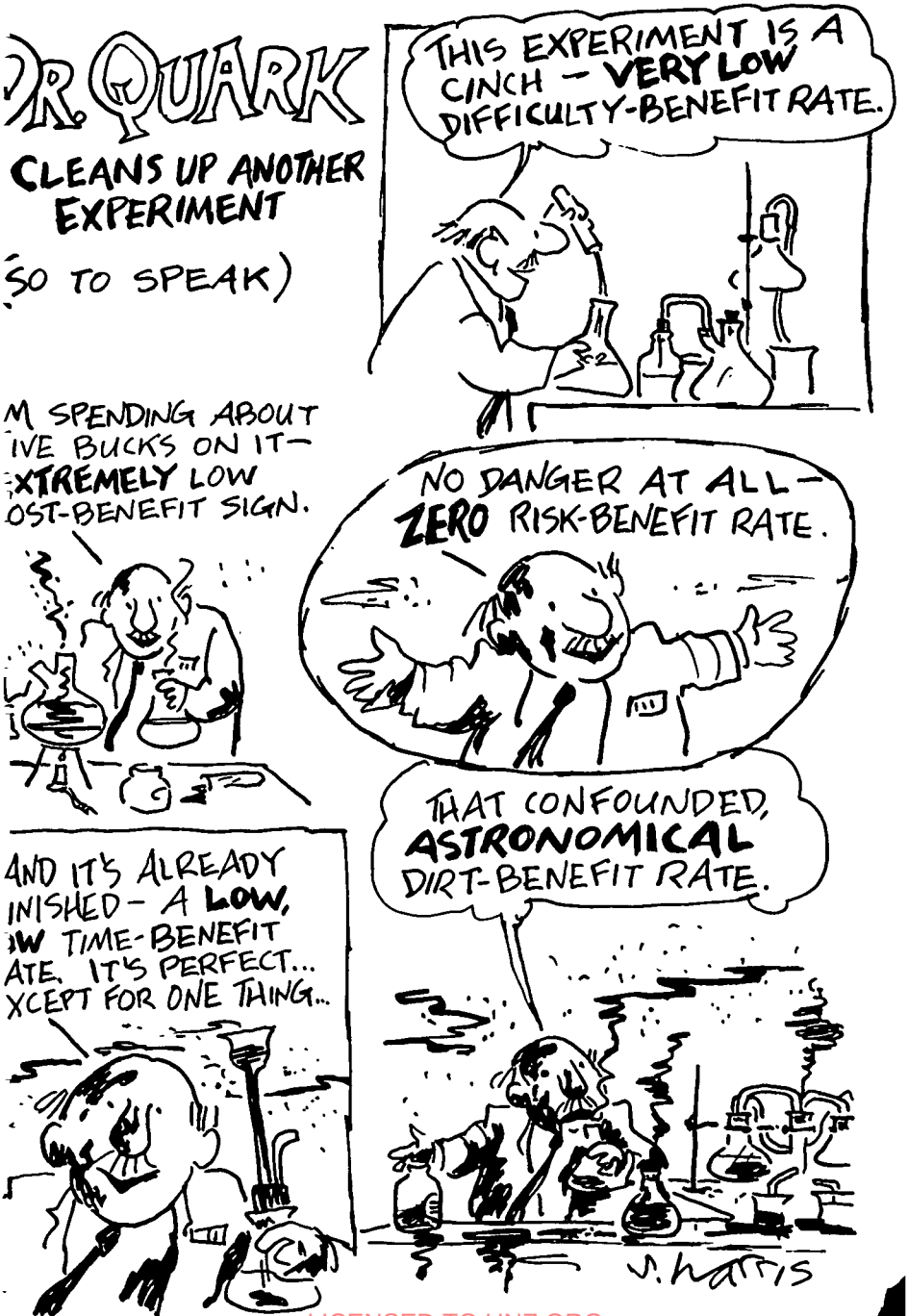
DR QUARK

CLEANS UP ANOTHER EXPERIMENT

(SO TO SPEAK)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